

DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

OR HOW I WAS
CURSED BY THE GODS
AND DROPPED INTO
THE **ABYSS!**

WRITTEN BY Nekoko
ILLUSTRATED BY Yoh Hihara

NOVEL

6



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“Veranta, Ruler of the World. ...You better not screw up!” said Naiarotop. “I was supposed to draw praise throughout the gods’ realm for my work on Locklore...and get huge promotions. I will not let that piece of garbage, Kanbara, threaten my status and my future!”

■ NAIAROTOP

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"It appears this
is the hive of
insects that have
been buzzing
around Kanata."

RULER OF THE WORLD
VERANTA

THE DEMON KING OF
THE SIXTH HEAVEN
NOBUNAGA

"Impossible...
How, from where
did information
leak about us?!"

THE SILENT VOID
ZERO

LUNAÈRE



Reniement
raised his staff
again, and a
crazy number
of skulls shot
out from
Jonas's spirit.

“They’re
never-ending!
Wol, charge!
Let’s challenge
him to a fight!”

KANATA

WOL

VS. Reniement, the Backwards Man

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Seven Seas
Entertainment

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DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

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Chapter 1:

The Unseen Hand of the Gods

-1-

NAIROTOP

IN AN EMPTY, white space stood Naiarotop with green hair, wearing black formal wear as he gave a report to the Higher God that was his boss.

“...Yes, there are no mistakes this time. At long last, the high-ranking members of the Unseen Hand of the Gods will begin in earnest. Kanata cannot win against Nobunaga, the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven. And there is also Zero, the Silent Void, as a backup if Kanata somehow manages to slip past. He cannot hold against us now. We will finally bring an end to this drawn-out Kanata Kanbara issue and close this chapter in the story.”

“Even Veranta, the Ruler of the World and leader of the Hand, has determined it won’t be difficult to deal with Kanata,” he continued. “He has plans for what they will do once they dispose of Kanata. They appear to be laying out a plan to break the lich girl’s spirit and reseal her inside Cocytus.”

“Hmph. Well done, my subject. You disappointed me with your failures on this issue, but I am glad to see this farce will soon end.”

“Failures on this issue...? Disappointed...? Look who’s talking...” Naiarotop muttered without thinking, a grimace on his face. He wasn’t exactly satisfied with how his master handled this situation either.

He accepted that the initial mistake was his fault. All of this originated from a lack of proper oversight on his part; he’d been arrogant and complacent since things were going well in Locklore. He’d never had a full handle on the situation since Lunaère’s existence had gone unnoticed for so long, even though she was

an uncontrollable balance breaker that even Cocytus couldn't hold. It was also his fault that the gods noticed her once she met Kanata, a traveler from another world.

Naiarotop acknowledged that without argument. But it was the Higher Gods that forced the impossible task on him of resolving the situation with the least possible interference in Locklore, since it was established as a world for entertainment.

His feeble, half-baked plans only exposed the terrible state of the management of Locklore, and his reputation tanked because of how long this was dragging on.

Exasperated with the scandal, fewer gods now watched Locklore simply for entertainment. Now the only gods watching were the ones who enjoyed watching Kanata destroy everything Naiarotop had slaved to build.

That meant that, while there was a huge increase in the amount of attention Locklore was drawing, the value and long-term potential of Locklore as entertainment was significantly diminished.

Once the situation had gotten that bad, Naiarotop was finally given permission to eliminate Kanata directly through the use of the Unseen Hand of the Gods, an organization that guarded the order of Locklore.

But even that had a catch.

When Naiarotop's master increased the scope of Naiarotop's involvement, he also went public with the pitch that Naiarotop was facing off against Kanata. "Kanata vs. Naiarotop, the Lower God"—a sort of dramatization of the situation.

Naiarotop's master hated the other gods seeing him as an ineffectual director of the world of Locklore, which was now going up in flames due to poor management. So, he turned the bad press toward his subordinate who was actually doing the work: Naiarotop.

At least that's how Naiarotop viewed the situation.

And, just as his master had intended, the gods were now watching Naiarotop with curiosity. He became a lightning rod for their abuse, meaning anyone else involved with managing Locklore got by largely unscathed by the jeers and criticism.

"Do you wish to say something, my subject?" asked Naiarotop's master.

Naiarotop's eyes narrowed, and he grit his teeth in anger. "Yes... Yes! There is a lot I'd like to say! I won't let you claim you aren't at all responsible for this series of disasters! We should have just stepped in with force if we had to and squashed that pathetic lower being at the start! I've been saying that since the beginning! This would've never happened if we *had!*"

Just as he said, there had been several chances before where they could have taken out Kanata with force. Even if the more observant gods cried foul for rule-breaking use of interference, the criticism would have eventually faded if they just ignored it.

The gods were all powerful and lovers of entertainment, which meant they were also very prone to losing interest quickly. Naiarotop and his master wouldn't have been able to avoid a little bit of suspicion regarding their handling of Locklore, but he was certain things would have been better than they were now.

"Ahh... Listen here, my subject, you find yourself in the firing line now because you panicked during the incident with Alice and directly used magic to attack Kanata Kanbara. That is the biggest factor...the greatest of your follies. And despite the fact that there were innumerable other ways you could have forcefully interfered, you chose that direct method. There are too many eagle-eyed gods with too much time on their hands, meaning there was no chance such a blatant action would go unnoticed. Locklore's greatest selling point was that we could withhold interference in the world as much as possible, but your bungling moves meant that was all for naught. Because of that, I had to express

that this interference was not in fact approved by management and was nothing more than a subordinate handling the situation by stepping out of bounds.”

“Excuses, excuses, excuses! True, that aspect might have been a factor as well...but I’m sure you were also planning on shifting the other gods’ attention from you by making me a laughingstock!”

“It was simply the most convenient option from all perspectives. If this issue is resolved without further incident, I will make accommodations to recover the reputation you lost during this.”

“...Really? You’re not just saying whatever pleasant-sounding things you can think of to lure me in and get me working, only to toss me aside when you feel like it?”

“Trust is everything to a god. Have I ever gone back on even the smallest of promises? I will admit that, as you say, there may have been some intent to protect management as a whole when I painted you the clown of this fiasco. ... And I am also to blame for failing to catch your sloppy work. However, I plan to make appropriate amends to you if you successfully carry out your duty and resolve this situation.”

“A-all right. Well then, I’ll hold you to that once I put Kanata Kanbara in his grave! Please don’t betray me...”

“However, bear in mind I will *only* make these amends *if* you are able to fix the Kanata Kanbara issue,” said Naiarotop’s master in a low, threatening voice.

“O-of course, I fully understand. But it won’t be a problem, anyway. After all, the Unseen Hand—”

“The Unseen Hand of the Gods is Locklore’s final stronghold. If the worst were to happen...then you should be prepared for Locklore’s end. And your own.”

“U-u-understood...yes, that’s entirely...” babbled Naiarotop incoherently, and he felt his master’s presence vanish. It seemed his master’s attention was no

longer on him.

Naiarotop simply took deep breaths and calmed himself, then pointed a finger into the air. Space there warped and formed a vortex that showed a masked man, the leader of the Unseen Hand of the Gods.

“Veranta, Ruler of the World. ...You better not screw up!” said Naiarotop. “I was supposed to draw praise throughout the gods’ realm for my work on Locklore...and get huge promotions. I will not let that piece of garbage, Kanbara, threaten my status and my future!”

-2-

WE WERE IN THE merchant city of Ploroque, gathered in front of the item shop called The Pixie’s Wingbeats. Pomera, Philia, Rosemonde, and I stood - facing Mel, the shop owner, with her tiny little red hat.

“You’re all leaving already...?” she said reluctantly. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Yeah, there’s somewhere we need to go,” I said.

“But I haven’t even given you your share of profits, like the product rights. You should relax here a bit longer...”

“I’m really sorry, but we’re in a hurry. We don’t even know how much time we have...” I bowed my head slightly.

Honestly, I wasn’t helping Mel for the money in the first place. I could get as much money as I needed with alchemy and selling whatever items I felt like getting rid of. I helped her partially because I couldn’t bear the idea of her being stuck in that awful situation—but mostly because helping Mel was a condition for getting Rosemonde to come with us to the Garden of the Dragons.

“I guess there’s nothing I can do then,” said Mel. “You seem like the kind of person who’s got a lot of stuff going on, Kanata. I’m sorry I couldn’t thank you properly.”

Grede, the Lord of Merchants, used to control the city of greed, Ploroque, from the shadows. But his true identity was Adam, a homunculus. He was using the vast resources of Ploroque to develop weapons and had plans to overthrow the kingdom.

And behind him, was the vanguard of Naiarotop's soldiers...the leader of the Unseen Hand of the Gods, Veranta.

The Unseen Hand sowed dangerous seeds across the various regions of Locklore, all to be triggered at their discretion in order to market Locklore to the gods as entertainment. Adam's entire life was planned out for that one purpose.

Veranta directed Adam to act against me so that he could measure my strength, since I was going up against Naiarotop. I was willing to bet Veranta was going to make another move soon. I needed to talk to Ramiel, a former member of the Unseen Hand, so I could get whatever information I could out of her. That meant another trip to the Garden of the Dragons. Rosemonde was coming along to be my bargaining chip, so I could get that information out of her.

I always planned on going back to interrogate her, but having Veranta make contact directly with me meant I couldn't put it off any longer.

"I can't really do anything about all the different rights since it takes time to submit the formal paperwork and you're in a hurry, but at least take some money!" said Mel. "I have *loads* of money in the shop! Seriously, just grab however much you want! I won't be able to live with myself if I don't give you something!"

"Wait... Isn't the new lord of Ploroque, Isabella-san, handling your finances? She won't be happy if you do something like that without her permission," I said.

"Well, I've got the papers ready, so just come back whenever you want!" Mel replied fervently as she clenched her fists.

“Y-yeah, sure. I’ll definitely come back to Ploroque to visit once I’ve sorted out the problems I’ve got.”

“Not definitely! *Absolutely!*”

First...I had to clean up my problems with the Unseen Hand of the Gods, and Naiarotop after them.

Honestly, I didn’t know if I could do anything about him, seeing as he was a higher being. Naiarotop was basically the person who created this entire world, after all. But I couldn’t just let him have his way, since he was determined to kill me.

“Rosemonde, you’ll come back to visit Ploroque sometime, won’t you?” asked Mel. “It sounds like they only need you for a bit... You’re not going to be with Kanata forever, right? Right? You’ll come back to visit, *right?!?*”

“My homebase is in Manaloch. I’m headed back there after going to the Garden of the Dragons. There’s a lot that needs doing in Manaloch, kid,” said Rosemonde.

“Ooooooh! But Ploroque is such a nice plaaaaace! You should move here! I’d even hire you as a guard for my store! I’ll pay you! With real money! As much as you want!” said Mel, desperately trying to sway Rosemonde.

Maybe, just maybe, Mel isn’t the kind of person that should have access to large amounts of money...

Mel originally came to this town because she was conned by Wantz. Then, she let Grede & Co. seize all her money. And while the leader of the city had changed, the fact that Ploroque was a battleground for the greediest of merchants hadn’t changed at all. I just hoped I wouldn’t come back to find she’d accepted the financial support of someone she didn’t know very well and got herself wrapped up in something bad.

“Rosemonde, come oooooon, come live in Ploroque! I’m raking it in now. I’m like a big shot!” said Mel.

Mel had her arms wrapped around Rosemonde's legs, with snot running down her face. Rosemonde was desperate to calm her down.

"L-let go of me, kid! Don't cling like that! I swear, I'll come back to make fun of you at least!" said Rosemonde.

"Rosemonde... First, you have Ramiel, now this. You end up with a lot of odd people attached to you," murmured Pomera.

She must have drawn people to her because she was caring, even though she put on a tough face. I first started helping Mel because it was a condition for negotiating with Rosemonde, but Rosemonde started helping Mel out of the sheer goodness of her heart.

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WE PARTED WAYS with Mel and left town, then headed to the Garden of the Dragons.

"...Hey, you planning on summoning that beast of a dog again?" asked Rosemonde uneasily once we'd passed through Ploroque's city gates and walked a little ways.

I stopped and looked back. We were a good distance from the city at this point. There was no risk of causing a scene in town if I summoned here.

"Beast of a dog...? Wol's a good boy," I insisted.

"...Sure, sure. But maybe we should just go back to town and hire a carriage."

"Wol's way faster. Plus, he's cute."

"Cute...? That thing...?" Rosemonde shook her head like she didn't understand.

"You get used to him," said Pomera. "Even I've started to think he's kind of cute after meeting him so many times. Hee hee hee, he even looks really happy when he eats meat out of my hand!"

“I’m not sure that’s *gettin’ used to him*. More like, *becoming numb*, maybe...?” Rosemonde asked uneasily.

“Rosemonde, you don’t like doggies either? You’re the same as Philia!” said Philia happily to Rosemonde.

“This is entirely different from disliking dogs! The last time I met that thing, he nearly tore my arm off! My *entire* arm! You’re all such weirdos. *Sigh*, I feel like no matter how many lives I have, it’s not enough to hang out with the three of you...” Rosemonde pressed a hand to her forehead as she hung her head in frustration.

“You’ll be fine,” I said. “I have plenty of Nine Lives Elixirs in my magic bag, and they’re powerful recovery potions. Even if you lose an arm or two, we can grow them right back, no issue.”

When we could find time, I was having Pomera level up in the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm or study white magic with elixir doping. Soon, we wouldn’t have to use rare items like the Nine Lives Elixirs. Instead, she’d be able to heal something as trivial as a missing limb with a single spell.

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about when I say you’re weirdos,” said Rosemonde.

“We’ve been in Ploroque so long I haven’t been able to get out into nature and look after Wol. He gets lonely easy. I really should summon him...” I said.

“...You’re talking about a monster as casually as some pet you haven’t seen...” Rosemonde let out a tired and resigned sigh. “Whatever, kid. To you, that’s probably exactly what it’s like.”

I drew the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh from its sheath and held it up.
“Summoning Magic Level 18: Wolzottl.”

A magic circle appeared, then a nearly ten-foot-tall, massive dog with beautiful blue fur materialized within it.

“Awoooooooo!” Wolzottl howled toward the sky, then opened his mouth wide

and rushed straight at me.

“H-hey, you sure he didn’t forget who you are?!” cried Rosemonde who was beside me as she scrambled to grab her weapon. There was a chance she was going to get dragged into this, so I pushed her to the side while I took a step forward and thrust my sword ahead.

“Awooooooooooooooooo!” Wolzottl came at me trying to bite, but his jaws closed on the blade of my sword. I pulled it back as he hung on, dragging him off balance.

He tumbled to the ground and rolled onto his back, and I let go of my sword to crouch down and rub his belly.

“Woof, woof... Woof!” Wolzottl let out high-pitched yips, his eyes closed in enjoyment and his neck stretched out as his two tails wagged vigorously.

“Good boy! Good boy! Who’s a good boy? You’re a bit calmer now, aren’t you, Wol?” I said.

“Woof...”

“I’ve been busy lately... Sorry I haven’t had a chance to summon you.”

“You’re acting like we weren’t almost just mauled to death...” said Rosemonde, getting unsteadily to her feet.

“He was just playing. It was a love nip at most. He probably just got a bit excited because it’s been so long since I’ve called him,” I explained.

“You know, someone’s going to end up dead at some point. That was clearly not a *love nip* or...nah. You know what? It’s fine. If that beast is satisfied, could we just hurry it up to the Garden of the Dragons?” Rosemonde let out a tired sigh.

“That’s the spirit, Rosemonde! You’re slowly getting used to how things are with Kanata,” said Pomera happily. “I’m starting to feel an odd sort of kinship with you. A long time ago, I was also shocked with every single little thing Kanata did.”

“I don’t *want* to get used to this.”

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“**A**woooooo!”

We hopped on Wolzottl and set off. In no time, we arrived at the valley where the entrance to the Garden of the Dragons was hidden. As Wolzottl landed, his claws dug into the earth and a cloud of dust kicked up into the air.

“Thank you, Wol,” I said as I leapt off his back, and he gently lowered his head toward me.

I gave him a pat, and his two tails wagged furiously with joy. Then I softly stroked the fur on his cheek before scratching under his chin. His eyes closed in joy, and he pressed his snout into my hand.

“Woof! Awoooooo!”

“...Guess I kind of see why you think he’s cute... *Maybe*,” said Rosemonde, watching Wolzottl warily.

“Do you want to pet him too?” I asked.

“Nah, kid. Unlike you, humans like me would die if bitten by a high-level spirit.”

“Hey, I’m human too...”

Wolzottl raised his head and looked toward the waterfall inside the valley.

“Guess that’s where we get into the Garden of the Dragons,” said Rosemonde. “The hidden village of the dragonkin... I turned back at the entrance last time, but I’m curious. Since they’re Ramiel’s people, I’m sure they’re not an easy group to get along with,” Rosemonde said sadly, then her expression clouded over, and she sighed. “Actually, the Ramiel I knew was just a front. The real person wasn’t that weak, cheeky little brat. She’s a cold, calculating monster and one of the people who rule the world from behind the

scenes.”

There was something melancholic about her expression.

“Rosemonde-san...” I said quietly, then I suddenly remembered the exchange between Pomera and Ramiel when she was imprisoned.

“I just don’t think the way you acted—like a child who doesn’t know anything about the world—was an act to make us let our guard down...”

“Huh...? Act? Don’t know anything about the world? Are you making fun of me?”

A cold, calculating ruler?

W-well...she was actually quite cold and calculating—and a ruler of the world. Ramiel had successfully deceived us and challenged me to a fight in a location that was to her advantage, just as she planned.

In all honesty, if I had been a lower level, Ramiel could have killed me by using the magic of the Dragon Vortex. She didn’t hesitate to sacrifice others for her goals. She was a frigid, dangerous person. That much was true.

But...even if that was so, that didn’t necessarily change the part about her being a cheeky, clueless brat too.

“A cold, calculating, immortal, world-ruling, cheeky brat...?” I muttered as I placed a hand on my chin in thought.

“You say something, Kanata?” asked Rosemonde.

“O-oh, ah...n-nothing.”

“Anyway, why is she asking for me at this point...? Feels weird. It’s not like she wanted to see me just because she’s got nothing better to do.” Rosemonde said that flippantly, but I knew there was a high probability that was all Ramiel cared about, if I thought back to how she was acting.

“I think...she’s probably not thinking about a whole lot at this point. But let’s just get going,” I said.

We entered the cave hidden behind the waterfall that acted as the entrance for the Garden of the Dragons.

“What a damp, gloomy place...” said Rosemonde. “I heard the Garden of the Dragon’s supposed to be vibrant and beautiful. Is there really somewhere like that in the depths of all these rocks?”

“There is,” I said. “They protect a well of magic called the Dragon Vortex, and its influence causes all sorts of beautiful plants to grow. It’s just that lots of people from the outside would wander in here if they could see it, which would cause pointless fights with humans and make it more difficult to protect the Dragon Vortex. The dragonkin generally only give the location out to people who have helped them and people they can trust.”

As we walked and talked, we started to hear footsteps from the other end of the cave.

“Hah, you talk like you actually know something,” came a low, annoyed voice echoing from the cave. “The idea of Garden of the Dragons becoming a tourist destination for humans? Bah, what a ludicrous group of people you are. Sounds like you’re humans who have been here before, yet you bring your human acquaintances along? You take the Garden of the Dragons too lightly and it’s an insult to our honorable duty. We of the Garden of Dragons are not to be laughed at. I must ask you to leave. If you don’t listen, I will force you to go.”

There was a laugh filled with hostility. Rosemonde stopped warily and laid her hand on her cross-shaped staff.

“Seems there’s a dangerous guard,” she said.

“Leave it to me,” I said, stopping her. It was a bit hard to tell who this voice belonged to since it was echoing off the cave walls, but I was fairly sure I recognized it.

“Oh, you’re coming for me? I won’t show you any mercy,” said the voice as an overbearing, large, six-and-a-half-foot figure emerged from the darkness. He had pointy yellow hair and a stiff beard on his chin. He also had horns, wings,

and a tail...all characteristics of dragonkin.

“I recommend you run before I hurt—”

“Long time no see, Raigan-san,” I said.

“Ack! Kanata!” yelped Raigan as he jumped in fear. “...And you’re with that *child* that tossed me aside and the Holy Boozer Pomera!”

“Holy Boozer Pomera?! *Really?!*” cried Pomera as she pointed to herself with a look of incredulity.

It sounded like the story about Pomera drinking Raigan under the table had spread since we were last in the Garden.

Dragonkin were even more likely to respect powerful people than humans were, and they considered a person’s ability to hold their alcohol to be an indicator of the strength of that person’s body. *Holy Boozer Pomera* was probably considered a compliment among dragonkin, though Pomera didn’t seem to appreciate it much.

“Are you playing at being a guard again even though no one asked?” I said.

“I am the guardian defending the Garden of the Dragons!” said Raigan. “It’s obvious our duty would be hindered if humans discovered the Garden! I’m not doing this just to kill time! I-I know you may have saved the Garden, but you can’t just waltz in here with other humans!”

“You might not believe me, but we’re not going around telling just any human about this place. This person...her name is Rosemonde-san. And she’s here because Ridler wanted her to come...sort of.”

“Th-the Dragon King?! Are you saying this human is such an incredible person that His Majesty the Dragon King would go out of his way to invite her here?”

Raigan’s eyes grew wide. Not that Ridler called for Rosemonde to come to the Garden because of her strength, but...

“Bringing Rosemonde-san to the Garden was a condition Ramiel gave us for getting information about the Unseen Hand of the Gods.”

“Our ancestor and a wicked criminal... Eh? The Ruler of the Skies invited this woman here as a friend?! How could His Majesty invite such a dangerous individual to the Garden? No, even if I did have the ear of the Dragon King, it’s not my place to say anything, though it looks like you’ve brought another absurd monster here,” said Raigan, his head cradled in his hands. He let out a deep, resigned sigh.

It seemed Raigan had suddenly readjusted his opinion of Rosemonde, just because Ramiel had asked for her.

“Fine...follow me then. But Rosemonde or whatever your name was, the Garden of the Dragons is a *sacred* place. You must not cause any problems here,” said Raigan fearfully as he eyed her warily. He then spun around and walked farther into the cave.

“It looks like he’ll lead the way. Let’s follow,” I said.

“Great, but...don’t you think that guy’s got the wrong impression?” Rosemonde said to me uneasily. “I don’t want him thinking I’m some sort of monster like you, kid.”

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AFTER PASSING THROUGH the cave into the Garden of the Dragons, we quickly headed to the castle to meet with the Dragon King, Ridler.

“Well met, Kanata. The Garden of the Dragons is greatly indebted to you three. I welcome you back with open arms,” said Ridler, when we met him in the Chamber of the Dragon King on the highest floor of the castle. “And you are...?”

“Rosemonde. I’m an adventurer from Manaloch, the city of magic. I came because I heard a prisoner here requested a meeting with me.”

“Ah, you. So, you are the one the Ruler of the Skies spoke of.” Ridler stiffened

slightly, suddenly on edge. He shot a glance at me, as if checking everything was all right. Ridler seemed to be wondering if Rosemonde was trustworthy or not. He likely suspected there was some ulterior motive here, since this was the one person Ramiel went out of her way to bring up.

I personally thought Ridler was being too cautious of Ramiel, but she was one of the few super high-level people in the world. Not to mention that she was the person the dragonkin had feared for so long... Maybe his reaction to her was only natural.

“Rosemonde-san isn’t connected to the Unseen Hand of the Gods. She’s just your average, good-hearted adventurer. I guarantee she’s someone you can trust,” I said.

“I see. If you say so, Kanata, then I will trust her. That said, we dragonkin hold the law in high esteem, and I have questions that must be answered. We must get information from the Ruler of the Skies,” said Ridler. He stood from his throne, looking like he was going to immediately lead us to Ramiel. “Human adventurer, Rosemonde...the Ruler of the Skies is currently held underground below this very castle. She has been tightly bound, but she remains a dangerous opponent indeed. Stay on your guard. She seems to trust you, but...try not to give her any strange ideas.”

“U-understood, Your Majesty,” said Rosemonde a little timidly.

We followed Ridler to the basement of the castle where Ramiel was being held, passing through dark hallways, going deeper and deeper into its depths.

“I think I misread the situation because you were all treating this so casually,” said Rosemonde. “I thought this was just gonna be a typical jailhouse visit, even though you told me she was a member of the group that controls the world from the shadows.”

Rosemonde didn’t seem very confident. She hung her head as she walked, one hand to her forehead as she let out the occasional small sigh.

“Rosemonde, how did you come to know the Ruler of the Skies? What was

your relationship? And most importantly, why has she requested a meeting with you?" asked Ridler, turning back to face Rosemonde.

"Hell if I know..."

"Hm, so you are unable to answer? No, that is also fine. That tyrannical villain would not open up under normal circumstances. I presume there was something deep and unusual in the relationship between you two. I apologize for my tactless inquiry. However, I will ask that you allow me to be present during your meeting."

"I'm as much in the dark as you are..." replied Rosemonde, her voice even more uneasy than before, and she looked in my direction.

"Uhhh... You were with her the whole time you were guarding her in Ploroque, right? Did anything happen then?" I asked.

In the beginning, Ramiel hid her true identity and told us she fled from the Garden of the Dragons because her life was in danger. Rosemonde stepped up to act as her guard and protected her for a while, since Ploroque was fairly close to the Garden. But Ramiel's original goal was to use the magic of the Dragon Vortex to kill me, so she slipped away from Rosemonde when she felt like it.

"She wasn't any different from when the rest of you were around," said Rosemonde. "She was just being a selfish jerk the whole time, and I even felt like I was being pretty tough on her."

"Hmmm, I think you both might be overthinking this," said Pomera. "Are you sure she's not just asking for some random person she knows simply because she's bored being stuck underground? I mean, she immediately tried to stop us from leaving the moment we looked like we were about to go the last time we met with her. She doesn't seem to have any friends either..."

"Harsh, but fair. She is at the end of this dark, lonely corridor, after all. The Ramiel I met in person was likely just an act... But even if that was the case, I can't help feeling a little conflicted about someone I know being locked up in this dungeon forever," said Rosemonde, pity in her voice.

It suddenly hit me that maybe that was why Ramiel wanted to see Rosemonde.

After continuing down the hallway, we came to a heavy stone door.

“We’re here... Beyond this door is where the Ruler of the Skies is held,” said Ridler. As he touched a hand to the door, his ring glowed and the door slowly slid open to the side. “You may know better than me, but she is a sly and wicked dragonkin. Remain vigilant that you are not caught up by her silver tongue and...make sure you get information from her, by whatever means necessary.”

“I don’t know much about Ramiel, but I didn’t learn she was the worst kind of criminal until after we’d parted,” said Rosemonde, seeming anxious as ever because of what Ridler said. “You sure you want me to go in there? Are you sure I belong?”

“She was the one who asked for you, so you definitely should be here,” I replied.

I could see Ramiel through the widening gap in the stone door. Just like before, she was restrained with chains, both her arms held wide. Her body was wrapped in cloth covered with magic formulas.

“Huh, you’re back, Ridler? Hee hee hee...you really are desperate, aren’t you? They should be about to make a real move. Did something happen already? Even if it did, I’m not going to tell you anything else,” said Ramiel, the corners of her mouth curling up in a grin as she watched the door open. “Ridler, you’re a pathetic dragonkin at best. Don’t you think you’re being a bit arrogant thinking you can interfere with the Unseen Hand of the Gods?”

“Besides, you dragonkin are only a subordinate system to the Unseen Hand. The Unseen Hand is the law of the world, and it is a dragon’s role to uphold that law,” Ramiel continued. “The dragonkin only exist to protect the Dragon Vortex, located near human lands... You have a minor position in the grand scheme of controlling the world, at best. As long as things are going according to the

higher beings' will, then you should just relax. You'll regret it if you let some childish sense of justice push you from your..."

Ramiel finally noticed we were with Ridler. She stopped talking, and her jaw dropped wide open. Then her eyes narrowed teasingly, and a grin unlike the one from a moment before appeared on her face.

"My, my... Do I see Rosemonde there? I'd know that sourpuss face anywhere! Hee hee, how does it feel, Rosemonde? What was it like finding out someone you looked down on for being low level, someone you arrogantly protected, was in fact far more powerful than you? Hmmm?"

"..." A vein throbbed in Rosemonde's temple as she glared silently at Ramiel.

"Looks like you were completely fooled by my act. Hee hee hee, oh dear, it was so much fun. Quite the comedy. To think a lowly low-leveled human would go on about, 'I can protect one little brat,' or, 'Don't worry about a thing, I'm here.' Talking like you were better than me. Ah, you tried to act *so cool*, it makes me laugh. I bet you were running around Ploroque like crazy trying to find me when I disappeared. Am I right?"

Ramiel kept happily trying to get a rise from Rosemonde. It looked like Rosemonde hadn't expected this, because her expression went all the way past anger to simply blank.

"Ooh, does that reaction mean I'm right?" continued Ramiel. "Hee hee hee, this is so perfect! Oh, I wish I could have seen your face when you were running around Ploroque desperate to find me! And then the dumb look on your face when you learned the truth! I know I asked them to bring you here, but I didn't actually think you'd come straight here. What, do you like me or something? What were you expecting? Wait, is it possible that you were actually *worried* about me even after—"

Rosemonde turned on her heel. "I'm done. I was a fool to be worried and a fool for feeling even the tiniest speck of concern for this brat. Sorry, Kanata, but I'm going back up."

“R-Rosemonde-san, I completely understand why you’d be angry, but please just wait a bit! There’s a lot of information I need to get from Ramiel! And...I did help with getting Mel’s shop back in good shape, didn’t I?” I grabbed Rosemonde’s shoulder and stopped her from leaving.

“Doesn’t matter. The agreement was for me to meet with Ramiel. I’ve done that.”

“W-wait...please, I’m begging you, Rosemonde-san! She’s our only lead! She’s all there is!”

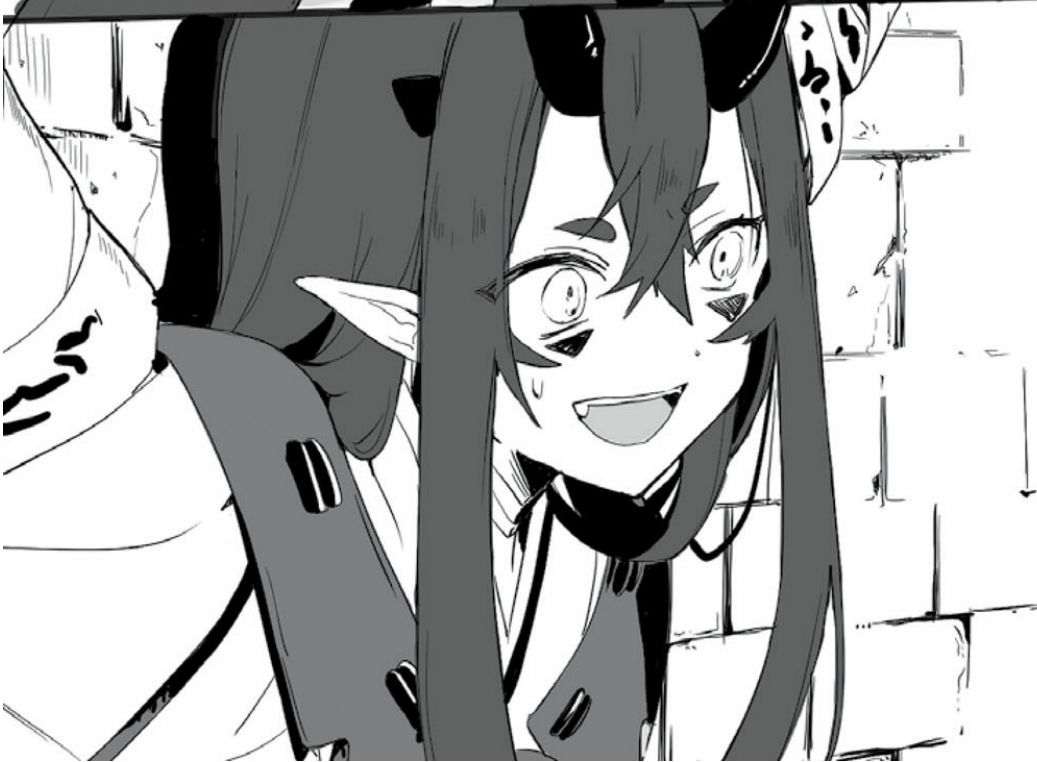
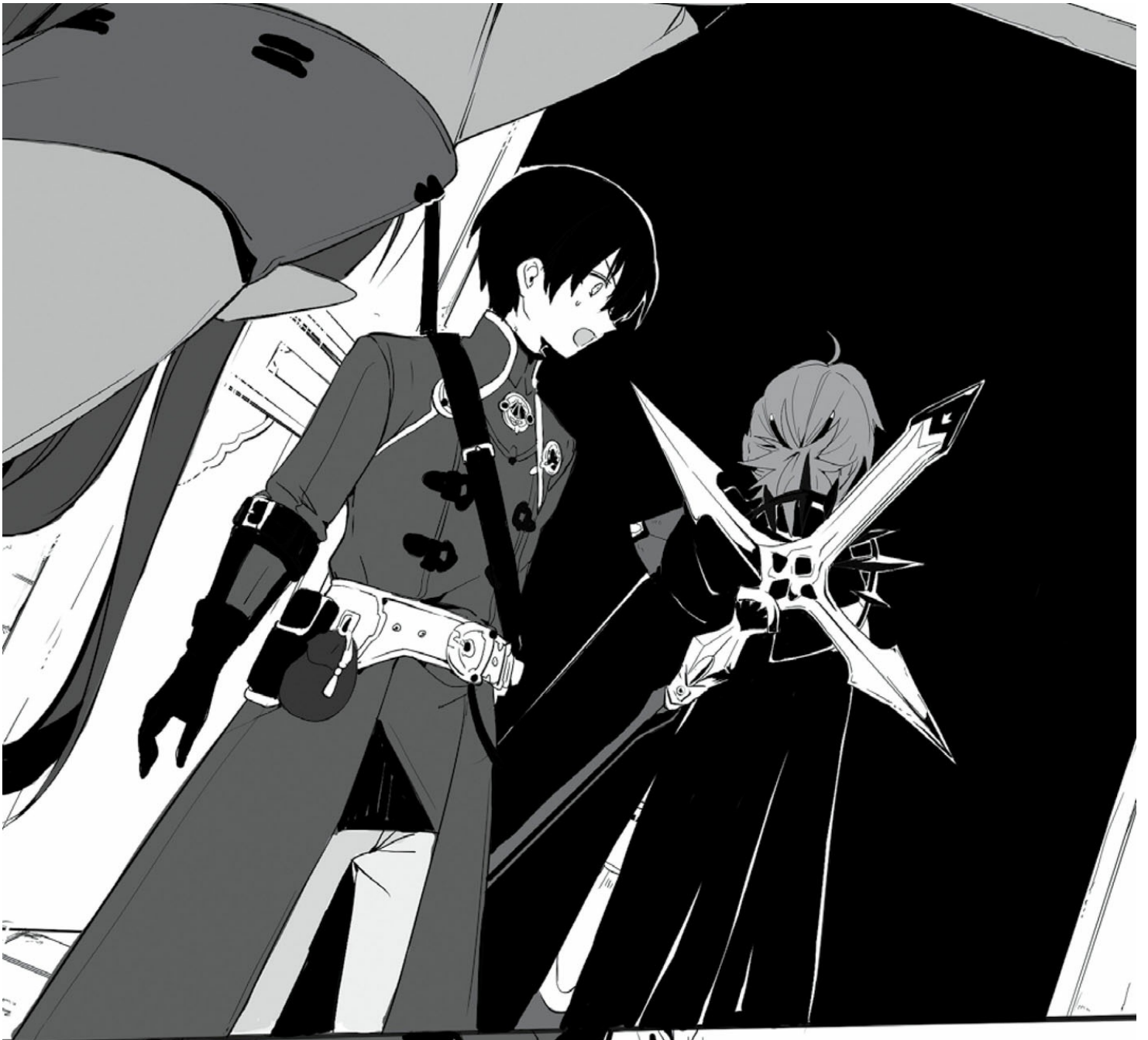
“H-hey, Rosemonde, are you throwing a hissy fit and leaving just because I teased you a little?” said Ramiel. “Didn’t you come all the way here to the Garden of the Dragons just to get information on the Unseen Hand of the Gods from me? But you’re just going to let your temper snap and mess up everything? Oh dear, I guess you really can’t do anything about humans’ thoughtlessness. That’s the sort of reckless, hasty action I’d expect from a short-lived race like the humans.”

“If you’re trying to convince her to stay, you’re doing a really bad job of it, so shut up!” I said. “I’ll do the convincing!”

Ramiel listened and closed her mouth after I turned back and shouted at her.

Seriously, what is up with her?

But I did sort of see why she was attached to Rosemonde.



Long ago, the Garden of the Dragons was a far more violent and cruel society that cared only for strength. Ramiel was a pathetically weak dragonkin born into that society, and she was nearly killed when she was sacrificed to the Dragon Vortex for being so weak.

But she managed to take the Vortex's magic and survive with the incredible power she got. Even so, she was shunned by her kinsfolk for the forbidden crime she committed. Despite that, she still had the xenophobic attitudes toward other races that was common in dragonkin at the time. She viewed them as lesser beings—she probably couldn't make any sort of real friends.

Rosemonde forgave Ramiel for her behavior and even used to worry about her, which probably made Rosemonde seem like something special to Ramiel.

"Rosemonde, you really do end up with a lot of odd people attached to you, maybe because you're so caring..." murmured Pomeria.

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"I'M CERTAIN the Unseen Hand of the Gods will send in Nobunaga, the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven. He's a crude, loathsome man...but he's head and shoulders above anyone else in terms of pure battle capability.

Veranta has many tricks up his sleeve and an ability to adapt, while Sophia's weapons are her financial assets and political leverage. Even I don't know much about Zero, though."

I had somehow successfully convinced Rosemonde to stay with us, as well as get the information Ramiel promised us on the Unseen Hand of the Gods.

"Nobunaga's fighting style relies on his incredible strength and Yamato-style sword techniques. He'll use essentially no magic on you. And...in terms of level, I think he's a step up from you, Kanata," she said to me with a sneer.

"Higher level than me...?"

All the opponents I'd faced so far had been at a lower level. My current level was a bit over 4,700. Other than the demons in the Cursed Mirror and the monsters of Cocytus, the most powerful thing I'd fought was the Red King at just over 3,000.

"Nobunaga is obsessed with combat," continued Ramiel. "He hates fighting alongside allies. If he goes on the offensive, the other members will likely just watch. But even though he has a high level, his fighting style is simple, like I already said, and he's just violent and dumb. If you work with your friends and surround him, you might just have a chance of winning."

"So, we need to come together, get ready, and wait for him to come at us," I said.

Based on what Ramiel said, it seemed like we would have plenty of power to overcome him if Pomera, Philia, and I all got ready. It might be a good idea to summon Wolzottl as well.

Nobunaga might be the one with a huge advantage in levels, but if he made the wrong move when attacking, he could actually be less dangerous than Ramiel had been when she drew on the Dragon Vortex's magic and nearly destroyed the stability of the world.

And knowing what moves Nobunaga had meant I could feel more at ease.

"Except that doesn't account for Nobunaga's secret weapon," said Ramiel. "Hee hee, it doesn't matter if you all come together, Nobunaga will cut you all down with one swing of his magic sword."

"His secret weapon...?"

Ramiel had mentioned it before, a secret weapon that you had no way of handling if you didn't know about it in advance. Was that this magic sword she was talking about?

"His magic sword is called the Flow of Time. It's an ancient item that originally belonged to a traveler from another world. The moment he pulls it from its

sheath, he can stop time. He can use it to make an unavoidable, instant kill attack.”

“H-he can...stop time...?” *Now* I was hearing about a horrifyingly dangerous item?

“I-is something like that even possible? There’s no way to counter that even if you know about it,” said Rosemonde, looking shaken up.

“It’s not entirely impossible to counter it,” said Ramiel, sounding carefree, like this had nothing to do with her. “He can stop time, but it’s only for a brief moment. He has to draw the sword in order to prepare for it, and it uses a *lot* of magic. You just have to make sure he doesn’t have a chance to draw the Flow of Time or put a lot of distance between you and him if you see him doing it.”

True, if we didn’t know about it, we’d find ourselves cut down and killed before we even realized it. We would die before we could even react. Still, this wasn’t the sort of thing you could make a good countermeasure for even when you did know about it. There was no way we could fight a higher-level opponent like Nobunaga in a way that made sure he never had the chance to draw his sword.

“The biggest thing is that Nobunaga doesn’t *like* how overly powerful his magic sword is,” said Ramiel. “He’s *such* a murder-obsessed, battle-loving maniac. He won’t draw his sword so long as he has his guard down. Hee hee... but that all does come down to his whims. The only thing you can be sure about is that he won’t draw the Flow of Time the moment you meet him. Battle is the single most important thing to that cretin. He won’t sully that—he’ll wait to pull his sword, instead. Whether that’s good or bad, though...”

“Wh-what should we do, Kanata? With a weapon as ridiculous as that... there’s nothing we can do about it...” said Pomera with concern.

“Fighting him does get a bit easier knowing this, but...” I placed a hand over my mouth as I thought.

Our choices were to either take him down from a distance or defeat him

while he still felt over-confident. Neither of those were easy when it came to an enemy higher level than you.

“Is there any...weakness this Flow of Time has? Or Nobunaga himself?” I asked.

At this point, all we knew from Ramiel was that Nobunaga was a higher level and that he could stop time. While that did make it clear to me that the situation was way worse than I originally thought, it wasn't giving me the most important thing, and that was a way to solve the problem.

“I'm pretty sure I've told you more than enough,” said Ramiel. “You can figure out the rest by yourselves. Besides, maybe you've gotten the wrong impression. Hee hee, I'm *not* interested in pretending to be your friend. I just think Nobunaga is a battle-crazed lunatic that doesn't have what it takes to be a ruler of the world. Aaand...I see a good opportunity in throwing the two of you against each other. I've always thought he wasn't suited for being in the Unseen Hand of the Gods. Best-case scenario for me is if the two of you take each other out.”

“You never stop talking, do you...”

“I think you're the one who doesn't understand things here, Kanata. We are the law, you are the abnormality,” said Ramiel, making me remember what Veranta said.

“If the higher beings lose interest in this world...they will erase it.”

Naiarotop, a higher being, was obsessed with eliminating me, an abnormality in the world.

The world of Locklore was essentially media for the higher beings that took travelers from other worlds and turned their journeys into entertainment. As one of those travelers, I'd become far too powerful, and it seemed that was inconvenient for them.

I thought I could just swat aside the minor inconveniences that would come

my way because of that, but...it looked like the more I resisted, the more I turned into a problem the higher beings couldn't tolerate. My existence went against the concept of the program, and the fact that they couldn't eliminate me seemed to be dropping the value of Locklore in the eyes of the audience.

Veranta said if they couldn't eliminate me, the higher beings would just destroy the entire world of Locklore instead—the problem was so big I couldn't really wrap my head around it. Besides, I couldn't even get a handle on how powerful the higher beings really were, since it was such a massive scale. I couldn't give up though, seeing as I'd come this far.

“Hee hee...go on, pull together some desperate plan and clash with Nobunaga. Even if you do manage to beat him, there's absolutely no chance you can win against the Unseen Hand of the Gods. Nobunaga may have the advantage in simple battle capability...but Veranta is the most dangerous. That man knows he fights with the weight of Locklore on his shoulders, and that means he will be incredibly careful...and as *utterly cruel* as he needs to be.” Ramiel's lips curled up in a wicked smile.

These members of the Unseen Hand—Nobunaga and Veranta—were enemies of the most powerful variety, without a doubt.

At the moment, though, all I could do was get ready for Nobunaga's attack. I doubted he was the kind of opponent I could win against if I was busy thinking about what would happen after. And there was also a chance the situation would change somehow after fighting Nobunaga.

“It appears a fight that will decide the fate of this world is fast approaching,” said Ridler. “We dragonkin are tasked with remaining observers of humans' ordeals, but...Kanata, we owe you. And I have also thought that a period in history is soon coming where the dragonkin cannot simply accept their fate. We must consider for ourselves what we believe should be done. If there is anything I can do, simply ask.”

“Thank you, Ridler-san,” I said with a bow.

“Hee hee hee! You’re really making me laugh! You really think someone as pathetic as you can do anything against Nobunaga or Veranta, Ridler? Hilarious. The best you can do is pray the Garden of the Dragons doesn’t get dragged into the fight,” said Ramiel with a laugh.

Ridler glared at her, but he couldn’t argue with that.

Honestly, I was also thinking I shouldn’t get the dragonkin involved in this fight. Ridler and the other dragonkin in the Garden couldn’t stand against the Unseen Hand at all at their level. Ridler likely understood that too.

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THE UNSEEN HAND OF THE GODS

THE NORTHERN REGION of the continent Kanata and his friends were on was monster territory, where no humans dared step foot. Deep in that region was a massive tower: the Arm of the Gods. Three people gathered inside that tower.

Sitting on the throne was a masked man. That was King Veranta, Ruler of the World. There was also the Silent Void, a figure hidden beneath a cloth inscribed with magic formulas. The last was the nearly ten-foot-tall giant of a man, devil-like and clad in full armor. He was Nobunaga, the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven.

These three people were among the Five Fingers, members of the Unseen Hand of the Gods which was an organization formed by the higher beings in order to control the world of Locklore.

“I understand there are rare events occurring that may shake the foundations of this world, but do you really have to call us here so often? What’s changed, Veranta? Am I finally being sent out to deal with the problem? I’m not interested in another pointless report,” said Nobunaga with some irritation.

Veranta was the only one who communicated with the higher beings. In the vast majority of situations—even significant problems—only Veranta, or perhaps Sophia, with her large worldwide influence, would be the one to handle them.

On top of that, all the members of the Unseen Hand of the Gods were people who transcended normal beings—people who were exempt from any concept of a life span. There had never been an instance of this organization being called together so casually and so often in such a short time. But lately, they were having meeting after meeting after meeting, with only a few days in between.

Nobunaga was not a particularly patient man, and he wasn't actually that interested in the fate or order of the world. He honestly couldn't care less if Veranta shared the minutiae of the situation with him.

"It's depressing talking to you one-on-one in this gloom. You go on for so long as well. I never imagined I would miss that unpleasant Ramiel or Sophia, though it's not like that pipsqueak says anything, after all," said Nobunaga as he looked in Zero's direction.

Zero didn't react to Nobunaga's stare or his words. They remained silent as always, below their magic-formula covered cloth.

Nobunaga wondered whether Zero was even capable of thought, which meant that as far as he was concerned, everything Veranta said was meant solely for Nobunaga alone. He would have felt better if Ramiel or Sophia were there. It was so hard for him to bear Veranta's long-winded speeches when he was the only one listening.

"I arranged for one of the pawns I placed—a homunculus called Adam—to fight Kanata, allowing me to measure Kanata's level and power," said Veranta. "I have decided you will be sufficient to take care of him alone. And you only intend to act on your own anyway, correct? I will task you with eliminating Kanata Kanbara."

Nobunaga grinned at Veranta's words. "So, it's finally my turn? *Hah!* If only you'd sent me out in the first place, this mess could have been cleaned up in no time. You should have given up on your silly spy work early on."

"Things are not so simple, Nobunaga. You ignore the complexity of everything. I know you were the former king of the Yamato Kingdom, but you are simply not suited to a leadership role."

"What did you say?!" Nobunaga glared fiercely at Veranta.

"We of the Unseen Hand of the Gods are not allowed failure, not even in the most extreme of cases. It is only natural that we should act with more caution than necessary. And Kanata is not the only person we need to be wary of. The divine messages persistently order us to be careful of the lich called Lunaère. She seems to be connected to Kanata, somehow, and there's a possibility she is more dangerous than him. Which means we must limit her actions before we attack Kanata."

"Are you really talking about boring preparations again?"

"This Lunaère appears at random. I've had difficulty tracking her and gathering information about her. I have, however, discovered a way to detect her location. She is surrounded by the powerful magic of the undead...the unholy impurity. She seals it away beneath a barrier in her robes, but it doesn't appear to be absolutely effective. We can use an item I created with my Omnipotent Alchemy to follow the trail of unholy impurity and detect where she is."

Veranta held his hand up. There was a flash of a magic circle, then a large crystal appeared, floating above his palm. Around the crystal were two rings with gradations on them.

"What's that?" asked Nobunaga.

"The Unholy Scale. It's an item that detects unholy impurity. Our target has a powerful unholy impurity unlike any other, which allows these rings to always provide us with a direction and rough estimate of distance to the lich. No

matter how quickly she appears and reappears, this will mean she is essentially in the palm of my hand,” explained Veranta. He pointed to the two rings around the crystal. “I will lay a trap for Lunaère using this. I am not certain if I will be able to kill her or not, but I expect it to buy you enough time to kill Kanata Kanbara.”

“Trap? Buy time? Your plans are as boring as ever, Veranta! Your tricks are always so uninspiring.”

“Kanata has several allies...and there is a possibility Kanata himself is hiding some secret weapon. Nobunaga, this is the one situation in which you cannot let your bad habits take over. You must pull your magic sword at the start... You must use the Flow of Time.”

Nobunaga snorted with laughter. “Not happening. This is the first time in a long time I get to face an opponent with some backbone. How utterly boring would it be if I use this blade and finish him off in a single swing? I have always kept this restriction on myself, ever since I got the Flow of Time. I will only draw it if I’m truly facing my death. If necessary, I’ll draw it. If not, I won’t. You cannot make that demand of me.” Nobunaga turned away from Veranta as he spoke. “If the plan is in place, there’s no need to waste any more time. Shall we begin?”

“What an impatient man. But, fine. The higher beings have been hurrying us on this,” said Veranta, then he stood from his throne. “Now we fight to protect my beloved Locklore.”

Just as Veranta said that the two rings on the Unholy Scale floating above his hand started whirling rapidly.

“Hmm...strange,” he said. “This one shows distance, and this one shows direction, but they won’t stop moving.”

“What’s with the spinning? You didn’t make a dud, did you? I’m starting to lose faith in you.” Nobunaga scowled, his enthusiasm fading.

“No, that’s not possible... This is odd, quite odd indeed. Is Lunaère repeatedly

casting long-distance teleportation spells? Normally, it would only move like this if it found Lunaère at a very close range, but..." Veranta stared at the Unholy Scale's odd motions with apparent confusion.

Zero, who had been waiting beside Veranta, suddenly shuddered. "Something...comes." The quiet statement sounded like it came from a child.

"Hey...did he just say something?" Nobunaga asked Veranta.

Zero's nickname was the Silent Void and, as far as Nobunaga was aware, Zero had never once said a word. But Nobunaga was pretty sure he just heard something come from his direction.

"Zero speaking? You must have mishe—"

Before Veranta could answer, the huge door leading into their base, the Arm of the Gods, was kicked in. Veranta and Nobunaga were so taken aback they froze, staring at the person on the other side of the door.

"H-how dare you burst into this sacred place! Do you know who we are—" started Veranta, but he gulped when he saw who their attacker was.

She had pale, lifeless skin and pure white hair. Only the tips were red, like they'd been dipped in fresh blood. It was the kind of beauty you only saw in dreams, and Veranta knew her face.

"Y-you, you're...Lunaère the Lich!"

Her mismatched eyes glared coolly at Veranta.

"I came all this way out here *because* I know who you are. It appears this is the hive of insects that have been buzzing around Kanata."

“IT APPEARS THIS is the hive of insects that have been buzzing around Kanata.” Lunaère’s cold eyes bore into Veranta and the others as her statement hung in the air.

“I-impossible... How... From where did information leak about us?!” Veranta was thrown off balance. He’d been using items from his gift skill, Omnipotent Alchemy, to make sure Lunaère didn’t notice them as he surveilled her with the utmost care.

As far as Veranta had seen, Lunaère showed no indication that she noticed she was being watched. She also hadn’t had a chance to get information from Kanata. So, how did Lunaère find out that they existed, let alone where their base was?

And how did she know the three of them were gathered there now, so that she could attack?

“Is this the power of some spell or item?” asked Veranta. “No, that alone doesn’t explain it. I made no mistakes. And yet, somehow you *knew*. I don’t know of any magic or item that can see everything in the world. The closest thing is Tiamat’s Eye, which Sophia...” Veranta suddenly remembered that Sophia had gone missing. “Impossible, did she give Lunaère that?!”

He cradled his head in his hands.

If she had Tiamat’s Eye, she could have looked everywhere in the world as much as she pleased. If she had time, she could have found out anything that was happening anywhere in the world, just by supplying the item with magic. It was the most powerful item for information gathering. There was no hiding from someone with that.

“But...? I never once saw Lunaère with Tiamat’s Eye in the time I’ve been observing her!”

Unknown to Veranta, Noble had used the Eye to seek information, meaning its use just happened to remain outside of his view. The noble mimic

had...*confiscated* the device from Lunaère—after she had acquired it from Sophia she'd been using it to spy on Kanata, a habit Noble had warned her against before.

But Noble couldn't use it to its full potential with his magic. So, even though they had the most powerful spying tool in the world, their haphazard use of it meant Veranta never suspected anything. It was simply an unfortunate coincidence for him.

"You're the lich the higher beings are so on edge about, huh?" said Nobunaga. "So, you're giving up on all the dawdling, roundabout strategies and coming straight here to finish things? Veranta, if you're scared of this woman, you can just stand back. This treasure is *my* prey."

Nobunaga grinned and took a step toward Lunaère. But then, Zero rushed past him.

"What...? I've never seen them act without orders..." Nobunaga's eyes followed Zero with suspicion.

Zero looked like he was moving closer to Lunaère, but then he made a sharp curve and moved away from her, straight for the tower's wall.

"H-hey, Zero, are you seriously running?! I didn't even think you had feelings," shouted Nobunaga, still glaring at Zero's back.

As far as Nobunaga was aware, Zero had never acted on his own and never even once spoke. They always just walked alongside Veranta. Veranta even explained Zero to Nobunaga as, "More of a phenomenon than a living being."

But the moment Zero saw Lunaère, he left Veranta's side in an attempt to flee by himself. The sight was hard to believe, considering how Zero had acted up until now.

Lunaère leapt after Zero, who was headed for the wall, and he glanced back warily toward the pursuing lich who was behind him before quickly facing forward again.

“Space-time Magic Level 22: Garden of the Muse!” came a harsh, high-pitched voice from below the cloth covering Zero, and a magic circle appeared centered on him. Lunaère lashed out at Zero with a kick that looked surely to land on his head, but her leg swiped through the air, passing entirely through his body. Lunaère allowed the force of the kick to carry her into a somersault and landed gracefully.

“...A space-time spell that allows all physical contact to pass through you... How annoying,” she said.

Zero glared at Lunaère for just a moment, then floated up gently and flew toward the wall. It was clear his plan was to pass through the wall and escape.

“Space-time Magic Level 20: Gravity Witch.” Lunaère raised her arm toward Zero.

A huge arm like a mass of black fog layered over her forearm, reaching out to snatch up Zero by his waist.

“Gyaaah?!” Zero shrieked.

“Gravity can interact with extra dimensions as well. You can’t escape with a simple permeation spell. It’s such a simple countermeasure...did you really not understand that?” said Lunaère.

The giant black arm holding on to Zero spun him around twice, then three times.

“Gyaaaaaaah!!!” he screeched.

“I’ll let you choose. Either you smack into the floor and break into pieces, or you pass through it, and plummet through the world forever. Your decision!”

The arm lifted Zero high, then flung them toward the ground. He must have undone his space-time spell because his body crashed violently into the floor. A pillar of dust burst into the air with a roar and the floor trembled, huge cracks running through it.

“Gyaaah...gyaaah...” Zero let out a faint, weak sound and trembled as he

pushed his body up slightly, but that must have drained the last of his energy, because he collapsed back to the ground.

“I slightly underestimated you. I really did mean to smash you to pieces there. You’re tougher than I expected,” said Lunaère flatly.

“I-impossible... Zero is the last of our secret weapons... How could he be defeated so easily?!” Veranta gaped.

It was too sudden, neither he nor Nobunaga could do anything. All they could do was watch in amazement as Zero was crushed.

Lunaère looked down to Zero, who lay at her feet. One of his pallid, slender arms poked out slightly from the edge of the cloth. There were magic formulas carved into the flesh. The marks looked like they could be brands, and they were still a vivid red.

“This...is not really a living creature. More a powerful golem, really. Did you really make something so unseemly?” Lunaère’s cold gaze turned toward Veranta. “Though...it’s much better than me, since I assumed my mother would be overjoyed that I came back from death.”

Lunaère took a step toward Veranta and Nobunaga.

“G-gargh!”

The pressure of her presence was enough to overwhelm Veranta, and he took a reflexive step backward.

“No need to be polite and take turns fighting me. I will take you both on at once,” said Lunaère to the final two fingers of the Unseen Hand left standing.

“I-IMPOSSIBLE... There’s no way this is possible!” said Veranta, his voice trembling with fear and unable to do anything but stand there. He suddenly realized his knees were shaking.

Veranta, the Ruler of the World, the man of a thousand forms and ten thousand moves. His gift skill, Omnipotent Alchemy, was not his only strength. He also had his mind, which let him utilize his skills to their fullest.

Veranta had brushed aside any obstruction in his way before. He never let himself grow complacent in his power. He always acted carefully, with several layers of insurance in place. He was easily able to bring Nobunaga under his control, despite the man being a higher level.

It was because of that that he had barely known fear for the past few centuries. And though normally

Lunaère had on her Impurity Sealing Robe to hold back her unholy impurity, that garment sealed up a large portion of her magic. She’d taken off that robe when she came to attack, meaning she was emitting an unholy impurity on a colossal scale.

The unholy impurity caused an instinctual fear in those who found themselves facing it. Veranta, being the wise man he was, fully understood how little hope they had of winning this fight. That only increased his terror.

His will steadily left him from the moment he realized his knees were shaking. The more he tried to stop his legs trembling and get himself to move in a meaningful way, the more the panic made them shake. Soon, he wasn’t even able to keep himself standing upright, and he collapsed to his knees.

“Wh-why didn’t the higher beings...warn us more directly that she was a monster this terrifying...?”

That was due to a decision by Naiarotop’s superior, but obviously Naiarotop wouldn’t tell Veranta all those details.

“Veranta...are you really making a shameful fuss just because things aren’t

quite going to plan?!” asked Nobunaga. “Little girl, I’m your opponent now! Don’t let yourself get carried away!”

As he roared at her, he brought his hand to one of the swords on his back—the Flow of Time. The moment he pulled it from its sheath, he would stop time in the world. It was an unavoidable death blow that went against the laws of nature.



Nobunaga found his purpose in life in battle, so he was loath to rely on the magic sword's power. He had vowed he would only ever draw the Flow of Time in the moment he truly found himself on the verge of death.

But he'd just watched Zero defeated in an instant and could see Veranta's spirit was broken. He knew that this was that very moment.

With the magic I have, I can stop time up to three times... If I mess up and waste my magic, I'll have no way of resisting. I'll end up dead!

As Nobunaga stepped forward, he took the Flow of Time from his shoulder and fastened it at his waist to allow him to use his deadly sword draw to its fullest. He set aside any unnecessary thoughts and put everything he was into fighting alone.

Keep going... Push toward the enemy! Don't rush! If this is the greatest attack of my life, I will be able to handle even that lich!

Just then, the light of a magic circle appeared centered on Lunaère. The mighty warrior instinctually sensed his own death the moment he saw that light. He was still too far away to reach her with the Flow of Time, but he immediately drew it anyway and the world stopped as he leapt backward.

It wasn't like he knew what was going to happen. It was simply that, after all the thousands of battles he'd survived, his honed instincts screamed to tell him it was dangerous to remain in that spot.

"Space-time Magic Level 19: Gravity Bomb."

A black light expanded in the space Nobunaga had just occupied. Then, it suddenly contracted and pulled the stone and tile together into one point with an explosive bang. If Nobunaga's decision had been even a moment later, his body would have been caught in the gravity of that black light, then crushed.

"Oh...? You actually managed to dodge. Was that the power of that sword you wield?" asked Lunaère, her eyes narrowing.

Nobunaga had returned the Flow of Time to its sheath once he'd fallen back.

This was the kind of situation where one wrong move meant his death. Yet, he wasn't afraid. Always obsessed with battle, he now felt an odd euphoria.

The Flow of Time made a fight no longer a fight. Nobunaga had never considered the possibility he would have to rely on this cheat item in single combat. He'd even been embarrassed by the fact that he had been unable to win certain battles without using it.

I want to see... I want to test if I can actually stand against this lich, even if it's in a foolhardy fight where I'm using my magic sword as a crutch!

Even in this life-threatening situation, Nobunaga smiled like a demon.

I can only stop the flow of time two more times! I'll use the first one to dodge the lich's next attack and move to her blind spot, then I'll use the second to cut her down!

Nobunaga laid his hand on the hilt of the Flow of Time and waited, still.

Nobunaga determined there was no need to force his way closer to her. No matter how skilled a magic user was, they were always open the moment they cast a powerful spell. And Nobunaga could draw his sword ever so slightly faster than this lich could cast. That was clear from the fact that he was able to avoid her gravity spell just now.

So long as he could hold her back with the Flow of Time, the moment she went to unleash a spell, he could find a way to victory.

"This is my first time seeing an item that stops time," said Lunaère flatly. Then the light of another magic circle appeared around her.

Now!!!

Nobunaga drew the magic sword.

The world lost its color along with the passage of time. While in that ashen world, Nobunaga leapt behind Lunaère to her blind spot. He was finally in range to unleash an unavoidable attack with the Flow of Time.

Lunaère's spell missed again, and she lost sight of Nobunaga since he was

suddenly in her blind spot. In that opening, Nobunaga would be able to cut off time again and strike her with his sword draw slash.

...Or he should have been able to.

“Space-time Magic Level 25: Ruler of the World.”

The light from the magic circle around Lunaère grew stronger and expanded.

A different spell?! And a level 25 one at THAT?

Nobunaga had no idea what kind of spell this could be. He could tell from one glance that the formulas and calculations, more complex than he'd ever seen, used an equally extreme level of magic.

He didn't know what was going to happen, but he couldn't very well sit and wait for the magic phenomenon to hit him.

He only had time for action. All he could do was draw the Flow of Time to strike the girl with a deadly, unavoidable attack.

“Lich! Have a taste of everything I've got!”

But...he couldn't draw his sword.

More accurately, his sword, the Flow of Time, was no longer in his grasp. Before he'd even processed that fact, Lunaère was swinging a sword at him. Nobunaga was sent flying from Lunaère's attack. He accelerated toward the wall in the distance, his massive frame crashing into it.

“I hit with the blunt side. There's a lot I need to ask you,” said Lunaère as she casually tossed the Flow of Time to the ground.

“Is that my sword...? How...? How...did this happen?” said Nobunaga weakly.

“Ah, all I did was stop time and take one of your swords.”

“What?!”

“My spell can stop time. Based on how you moved, it seems my spell stops time for close to twice as long as your sword,” she said as if it was no big deal.

“Ah ha ha... Ha ha ha ha!” Nobunaga burst into raucous laughter when he heard that. “Wonderful! Marvelous! I thought there was no one in this world who rivaled me in sheer strength, but there was a warrior of this caliber hiding here the whole time! Ah, I thought I got bored long ago, but the world gave me something so fascinating!”

And having shouted that, Nobunaga’s head flopped over as he lost consciousness.

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THE UNSEEN HAND OF THE GODS

AFTER ZERO, Nobunaga also ended up disappointingly laid out in front of Lunaère. Veranta, the leader of the Unseen Hand of the Gods, stared blankly at them.

“What a nightmare...” he said.

The Unseen Hand of the Gods had ruled the world for thousands of years, and now they were pushed to the verge of destruction by a single lich.

“Right...so there’s only one of you left. Would you like to surrender?” said Lunaère as she turned to face Veranta.

He pressed his hands to his knees. He’d somehow managed to pull himself together while Nobunaga was fighting.

“...I never imagined you would be this powerful,” he said. “This is why the higher beings have lost control. Lich girl, I accept that this encounter is our defeat. However, I cannot carry the weight of Locklore on my shoulders without steely resolve... I *will* destroy you and restore order to this world!” shouted Veranta, then he thrust his hand forward. “Omnipotent Alchemy, deploy!”

A golden gate appeared around Veranta along with a magic circle, then

Veranta disappeared with the gate.

“He ran? Teleportation using an item...” muttered Lunaère with disinterest.

Veranta appeared along with the golden gate in a distant desert. He stepped from the gate, his breath ragged as he let out a sigh of relief. He’d survived.

This place was one of the forbidden lands that no human set foot in, a place known as the Endless Wastes. It was a world of sand: nothing but sand for as far as the eye could see, rampant with vicious monsters. Not even the dragons, the law of the world, held sway over this place.

Even so, someone of Veranta’s level could handle the monsters here with ease.

This place also worked to counter Tiamat’s Eye, which Lunaère had. Even if she were able to catch sight of him in the Eye, she would have a hard time determining exactly where in the desert he was.

Even so, this will do nothing but buy me some time... I need to use Omnipotent Alchemy to create an item to shut down Tiamat’s Eye, but I’ve been pushed into a situation where I can’t gather sufficient materials.

Below his mask, Veranta bit his lip. He formed a magic circle above his hand, and an item appeared. It was a large crystal with two rings around it, the item that detected Lunaère’s unholy impurity.

For now, anyway, I can monitor her using this Unholy Scale. I’m glad I made this tool. This should allow me to avoid her coming to attack me.

His options had dropped with the loss of the other members of the Unseen Hand of the Gods, but Veranta didn’t believe he was entirely without choices. Now his goal was to somehow regain his footing, get himself into a situation where he could observe Lunaère and Kanata without being observed himself, and then lay traps for them.

He’d originally been thinking they should take out Kanata first, but Lunaère

was far more dangerous than he'd anticipated. It was going to be nearly impossible to take out Kanata while avoiding her notice. He had to eliminate her first, no matter what it took. That was his current plan.

As long as Lunaère was there, he would never be able to find a chance to take care of Kanata. She even had Tiamat's Eye, after all. He doubted whether any amount of struggle would allow him to push Kanata to destruction before she stepped in.

Lunaère, the lich...a user of high-level space-time magic. She can even stop time. A truly wicked opponent, but Nobunaga did succeed in affecting her casting a spell using the Flow of Time. I might have been overwhelmed before, but I am certain I could win against her!

The situation was so bad he couldn't claim it was anything but a major defeat, but he also knew he still had a chance to win. If he launched a surprise attack and followed up with a fight while he was at his best, he was sure he could at least inflict damage on Lunaère.

If I set the traps after making complete preparations using my Omnipotent Alchemy, then it should be possible to put that lich in her grave!

Veranta had absolutely not given up. He was already thinking of several strategies to eliminate both Kanata and Lunaère.

If he had Ramiel's ability to manipulate the Dragon Vortex, and her motivation...

Or if he had Sophia's information gathering skills and political influence...

Or if he had Nobunaga's high level and his Flow of Time...

Or if he had Zero's high-level space-time magic...

He would be able to come up with so many strategies with high probabilities of success for killing Lunaère, but he'd already lost them. There was nothing he could do about that.

But, in exchange for losing his pawns, he had gained plenty of information. So

long as he had Omnipotent Alchemy's flexibility, all he needed was time to make it possible for him to back Lunaère into a corner.

Veranta was greatly dissatisfied that the higher beings hadn't been clearer in their communications with information about Lunaère, but he'd never believed he could fully understand the workings of the higher beings' minds. There must be some sort of exalted, unyielding thought processes that he simply had no way of understanding.

And it was all in the past now anyway, there was nothing he could do about it. The only thing he could do now was give it his best.

"I lost every countermeasure I had for insurance. To think I must cross such a dangerous bridge in the fight that decides the fate of the world... I do not relish this kind of struggle, but I am resolved to do what needs to be done."

Veranta sucked in a deep breath.

"Lunaère, the lich... I *will* defeat you! I will not be intimidated by you! No matter how dishonorable and disgraceful I must be, I will do what needs to be done!" he shouted across the desert, as if telling himself those things.

Then an odd rattling sound came from near his hand. He looked down to see the two rings of the Unholy Scale whirling violently.

Veranta stared, following their movement for a few seconds in disbelief—then he suddenly remembered what it meant, and his face paled behind his mask. The two rings indicated the direction and distance of the target, and when they both spun wildly, it meant they detected the target approaching.

"You left clear traces of your teleportation magic. I wouldn't have thought you'd have such little care for your means of escape like that," came Lunaère's voice from behind him.

Veranta slowly turned around to see Lunaère floating in the air, looking down

at him. “But... I... I encrypted the magic circle’s formulas and created false spatial distortions...”

“And that was sloppy and insufficient.”

Veranta tapped the forehead of this mask. “...I finally realize why Zero didn’t use teleportation. He decided he wouldn’t be able to shake you from his trail if he did. I should have followed suit the moment that child chose to distance himself physically from you.”

“I swear I won’t harm you if you do as I say.”

“That’s good to hear. I never have been good with violent coercion.” Veranta spread his arms in defeat. Then, the moment the tension in Lunaère’s body lessened, he shouted, “Deploy!”

A cloud of dust exploded as a huge castle built itself, with Veranta safely inside. Two large, birdlike legs sprouted from it.

“This is my secret weapon, the Chicken-Legged Palace! It is an utterly impenetrable bastion! You’ve done well to push me this far, but you will never defeat me so long as I have this fortress! So long as I don’t lose here, I will be the one who prevails! No matter how long it takes! Do you think this is unfair? Well, I cannot lose! That is my truth!”

“If I can’t destroy it, then it’s just a massive coffin,” said Lunaère.

She pointed toward the Chicken-Legged Palace. A magic circle appeared, and a flaming dragon rose from its center. The flaming dragon flew straight toward the Chicken-Legged Palace and erupted in a massive, fiery explosion. Flames engulfed Veranta’s fortress, and the temperature inside began to increase.

“Aaaaagh!” Veranta’s scream echoed across the Endless Waste.

ONCE OUR MEETING with Ramiel was over, we headed for the castle’s exit.

We had continued to ask Ramiel questions but didn't get anything out of her other than what she already said about Nobunaga's fighting style and secret weapon... And the fact that there was no way I could win against the Unseen Hand of the Gods.

Ramiel had said before that she had no intention of talking about anything other than Nobunaga, so there was probably no point in questioning her more.

"Thank you for allowing us to see Ramiel. We did manage to learn a little about them," I said to Ridler with a bow.

"I only hope it is of some use to you. I will arrange food and lodging for you. Please, stay here for a while," he said.

"No, I think we should leave the Garden of the Dragons. This is a sacred place, and I don't want to cause you any trouble. Also, I want to start searching for them. I don't like how it feels to just sit around waiting for their surprise attack."

"I see. My apologies," said Ridler with a mix of emotions on his face. He was probably secretly relieved. Being the leader of the dragonkin, he probably wanted to avoid this place getting destroyed by Nobunaga.

Ramiel made Nobunaga out to be both a ruler of the world and the embodiment of brutality. I doubted our final battleground would make it out unscathed.

"Pomera-san, Philia-chan, what are you going to do?" I asked. "I'm going to be fighting someone way more powerful than we've ever gone against before. I can't drag you into that..."

Pomera's eyes grew round as I talked, then she exploded on me. "Didn't I tell you a long time ago that I owe you, and...and that helping each other out when you're in trouble is what friends do?! If this isn't the kind of enemy you can handle on your own, then that's all the more reason we shouldn't split up!"

"Pomera-san..."

“Besides, the worst situation I’ve ever been in, the time I thought I was most likely to die, wasn’t in the humanoid dragon incident in Manaloch, and it wasn’t when we were fighting Ramiel. It was when I went against the demons in the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm, so, at this point...it doesn’t even mean much of anything to me if you say the rulers of the world are after us,” she said, her eyes going devoid of any emotion.

“Ah...ha ha ha...” I laughed uncomfortably.

“Philia too! Philia will protect Kanata too!” said Philia with cheerful exuberance.

“Thank you, Pomera-san, and Philia-chan...”

Pomera was level 1,032 and Philia was 2,944—both strong enough that Nobunaga definitely couldn’t take them lightly. I had a much better chance of winning with them backing me up than I did on my own.

“And...um, speaking of... It’s sort of hard to say this, but would you two mind going into the Cursed Mirror again for some leveling?” I asked, and both Pomera and Philia’s expressions turned icy.

“K-Kanataaaaa...aren’t we high enough?” said Pomera, her voice shaking with nerves.

“No. At your level, we can still get you a level boost in the Cursed Mirror. There’s really a huge difference between level 1,000 and level 2,000. I think it’s better if we don’t get complacent with where you’re currently at.”

Pomera was, at the moment, about on par with the spider Demon King, Mother, or the Dragon King Ridler. If we got her up to level 2,000, she would be strong enough to take out Ramiel on her own, and Ramiel was part of the Unseen Hand. That was a pretty big difference in skills and levels.

“D-does Philia have to go in the mirror too...?” asked Philia with a look of fear that I didn’t often see from her.

“Well, I was hoping you’d support Pomera-san...” I said, and Philia hung her

head in disappointment.

“Not sure if my help will be worth anything, but do you mind if I come with you? You’re allies I’ve come this far with, and if you die somewhere, I dunno... I’ll have a hard time sleeping at night. I’ll take care of myself, at least,” said Rosemonde, and both Pomera and Philia turned to look at her. “Wh-what...?”

The two of them grabbed firmly onto Rosemonde’s shoulders.

“Kanata, Kanata, Rosemonde just said she would *help* us!!! I heard her say it! Let’s take her with us!” said Pomera.

“U-uh, Pomera, did I just say something I shouldn’t have?” asked Rosemonde.

The fight between me and Veranta had already begun, a fight to decide between an individual’s safety and the world’s order. Veranta had the upper hand, by a lot. Did I really have a chance of winning? Would it even be a good thing if I did win? I still couldn’t find an answer to those questions. But, even if it was wrong, I couldn’t just quietly let them kill me.

Looking back, most of the powerful enemies I’d encountered so far had been sent by Naiarotop—the Demon King Mother, Corpse Doll Alice, Ramiel, the Ruler of the Skies, and the homunculus Adam. One way or another, this fight with the Unseen Hand of the Gods was certainly going to be my last fight with Naiarotop.



“I feel like I’m going to be seeing Veranta again, really soon...” I said.

And that’s when it happened.

The light of a magic circle spread through the area, and I brought a hand up to shade my eyes against its brilliance.

“Is that...?!”

A shining golden gate appeared along with the light of the magic circle. I’d seen that gate before. It was an item Veranta used to teleport.

“The Unseen Hand of the Gods! They came this soon?!”

I put my hand on the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh.

A figure appeared from the gate.

“You...” I said as Ridler rushed past me toward the golden gate.

“They slipped past the barrier so easily to teleport in here! Well, you may be a servant of the higher beings, but I will not allow you to threaten the Garden of the Dragons!” Ridler cried. He spun gracefully, his long talons reaching out.

“Dragon Technique: Raging Dragon Dance!”

He unleashed a flurry of claw attacks, but the person who stepped through the gate easily knocked them aside with their bare hand as if it was nothing. Ridler’s face paled, even though he was the one on the offensive.

“Fine, then how about *this*?!”

Ridler used the momentum from having his claws knocked aside and spread his wings wide to twirl through the air and strike from unexpected directions. But his opponent immediately latched onto his wrist and dragged him to the ground.

“Gah?!” His body let out a dull crunch.

“I’m sorry. It seems I’ve entered the secret lands of the dragonkin,” said the figure.

“L-Lunaère-san?!”

For some reason, Lunaère was the one to step out from Veranta’s golden gate. And unlike when she was in Cocytus, she was wearing a dark-colored robe.

“I’m the one who intruded, and then I committed violence... I hope this doesn’t reflect poorly on Kanata,” she said in a troubled voice.

“L-Lunaère-san, why are you here?! What have you been doing this whole time? And, that gate...isn’t that the one the leader of the Unseen Hand of the Gods used?!” I asked.

The extravagant treasure-chest-shaped monster Noble appeared behind Lunaère. “Hey, what’s up, Kanata? Long time, no see,” he said. Then he paused and mumbled, “Well... We might’ve seen you every now and then...”

“Even Noble’s here?!”

Just as it occurred to me that Noble’s body looked a little swollen, he popped open his mouth and spit something out.

The person that came out was bound hand and foot with rope so he couldn’t move, and he thumped listlessly to the floor. He wore a familiar oval mask. It was, without a doubt, the leader of the Unseen Hand of the Gods: Veranta.

“Uhhh...” The dumbfounded sound came out of my mouth before I could stop it.

I had just pumped myself up and steeled my resolve for an epic battle, but now the person I was going to go up against was sprawled in front of me in a horrible state.

I didn’t see that coming.

“Lunaère-san... How...? Wh-what’s happening?!” I asked.

“I planned to return to Cocytus after the incident with the spider Demon King, but it appeared there was a group of people investigating and following you around. I found them and destroyed them first. I have already restrained the

other two main members,” stated Lunaère proudly, arms crossed.

It seemed it wasn’t just Veranta, the leader of the organization she’d taken care of. She’d already destroyed the *entire* Unseen Hand of the Gods.

I didn’t think I’d be able to handle the Unseen Hand, so I had thought about finding Lunaère and asking her advice. It turned out she was way ahead of me.

But still. This was too much, too fast.

“Actually, Lunaère’s the one who was investigating and following you around...” said Noble with a heavy sigh. Lunaère quickly pressed a hand on his lid to force his mouth shut.

“I-I don’t fully understand. This person is a member of the Unseen Hand...?” asked Ridler in confusion as he stood.

I shook my head. “No... It looks like the Unseen Hand’s already been destroyed.”

“Huh?” Ridler looked at me blankly. He was probably having a hard time keeping up, and honestly, so was I.

“Wh-which means...?” he asked.

That was exactly what I wanted to know too.

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ONCE LUNAÈRE ARRIVED, we returned to the castle. I bowed to Ridler as we walked down the corridor.

“I’m sorry, we keep barging into the castle and disturbing you. Thank you,” I said.

“The Garden of the Dragons is not a place where people other than dragonkin should go walking about. She may be your friend, but she could find herself in altercations if she were to go wandering. I hope keeping her here doesn’t upset

you,” he said.

“Not at all. Thank you for your concern.”

“Well...preventing altercations is mostly to protect my subjects. There are many hot-blooded individuals among my kind. If she ran into Raigan, for example, things could take a turn for the worse.”

Ridler glanced at Lunaère. She looked up at him, causing him to jump slightly and quickly look away.

We gathered in the Chamber of the Dragon King in the castle so we could get caught up on the situation.

“As I explained earlier....” said Lunaère, “You might consider me Kanata’s former teacher. Black magic gave me unholy impurity and brought me back from the grip of death, thus making me a lich, so I sincerely apologize for any discomfort this may cause.”

She clung tightly to my back as she explained this to everyone.

“A lich... So that’s why Kanata said those contradictory things. Huh. That makes sense,” said Pomera with a nod. Then she looked at Lunaère again and asked, “And, uh...why are you hiding behind Kanata...?”

“Lunaère-san doesn’t really get out much,” I said.

“Oh, okay.” Pomera nodded slightly, generally seeming to accept what I said.

“I am not particularly fond of interacting with humans,” said Lunaère, her tone emotionless. “I have lived alone in an underground dungeon. I may commit some egregious faux pas against your ways here on the surface, and I would greatly appreciate your understanding in those moments.

“And while I did say I was Kanata’s teacher, I simply saved his life in the dungeon and looked after him on a whim, which came from being a lich with eternal life. To explain it in terms you may understand, it was similar to casually saving the life of an insect that fell in a pond...though, he may not see it that way.”

Lunaère tightly gripped my clothing uneasily as she spoke.

“Uh...your actions don’t make that very convincing...” said Pomera hesitantly.

“A-as I said, I am truly unaware of what you may have heard from Kanata, and I would appreciate it if you stop looking at me with such curiosity. It’s...rather embarrassing.” Lunaère’s face turned redder as she spoke, and her tone, which had been perfectly flat before, faded gradually as she shrunk back behind me.

“...Are you okay, Lunaère-san? Uh, if you’re having a hard time talking, you can go take a rest somewhere else and I’ll explain things to everyone else. If you want...” I said quietly to her as I rubbed her back.

“I-I’m fine. But...I appreciate your concern, Kanata.”

She seemed really tense, but public speaking can do that to some people.

“What the heck’s with this display? Any sweeter and I’m gonna get a cavity. What am I even watching?” asked Rosemonde, looking bewildered.

“Th-that must be the kind of relationship they have... And I was sort of ready for this, but...b-but it’s sort of making me think I have no chance. I just, um, sorry...” Pomera’s face turned red as she looked at Lunaère with an uncomfortable expression that implied she couldn’t say anything.

“What are you talking about?!” called Lunaère. “Th-there is nothing between me and Kanata! Please refrain from interrupting me!”

“Are you Kanata’s wife?” asked Philia, her eyes sparkling as she looked at Lunaère, while Lunaère looked back, tears seemingly about to spill from her eyes.

“*Please* don’t tease her about that...” I said.

“S-sorry...” Philia said sincerely, surprisingly good at reading the situation.

We waited a few minutes for Lunaère to calm down, then she continued with her story. She somehow managed to pull herself together, and the mood in the room eased along with her. The tears in her eyes before were completely gone, and she was back to her original composure. Even the pink in her cheeks faded.

“You may find it difficult to understand, but a lich with eternal life is forever subject to their whims,” she continued. “I had intended to return to my normal way of living after Kanata left the dungeon, but...simply put, after he did, I just happened to sense a powerful magic coming from the outside world and I left the dungeon in order to investigate. I believe the incident with the spider Demon King in Manaloch caused an uproar in the human world.”

“She really thinks we’re going to buy that excuse...?” muttered Rosemonde quietly.

“...Which is why it is mere coincidence that I followed Kanata’s lead out into the world, and coincidence that I happened to be operating in the same region as him. In fact, because Kanata’s existence has drawn the attention of the higher beings, I had no choice but to intervene.”

“Lunaère-san, it’s okay. Everyone understands that point!” I said.

“Th-they might not fully understand if I don’t explain it thoroughly! I can’t let there be misunderstandings! I mean, the short version makes it sound like I was just chasing you!”

Despite having just regained her composure, Lunaère’s mask of indifference was crumbling again, and her flat tone wavering. I’d poked a sore spot I shouldn’t have.

“Lunaère, you’re the one making misunderstandings,” said Noble, breaking his silence with that exasperated remark.

“N-Noble! Nobody asked your opinion! Please, seriously, for now, just stop...” said Lunaère.

“...Noble, just this once, please stop,” I said, finding myself sympathizing with Lunaère. This conversation was going to go nowhere at this rate.

“Hmph, Kanata, you don’t like that, do you?” he said. “She’s so obsessed with you, but she acts like it’s shameful and tries to pretend you don’t even matter.”

“Well, I do have my thoughts on it...” I murmured without thinking, and

Lunaère shuddered.

“No, I-I’m not trying to say that I find it terrible that people might think we have that kind of relationship. It’s just... Look, I-I haven’t fully sorted through my own feelings, and, uh...ugh! I’m sorry, I’m really not used to this sort of situation... Kanata, d-did I upset you?”

Lunaère tightly held on to my sleeve and looked timidly up into my face. There was a mist of tears in her eyes.

“I-it’s fine! There’s no way I could ever hate you, Lunaère!” I said.

I glanced over at Noble and saw him sticking his tongue out and grinning. We’d completely fallen into his trap.

“I’m sorry... Could we, uh, could Lunaère-san get a bit of time to calm down?” I said over my shoulder to the others, my hand on Lunaère’s back until she calmed down.

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“YOU MAY FIND IT DIFFICULT to understand, but a lich with eternal life is forever subject to their whims,” she continued. “I had intended to return to my normal way of living after Kanata left the dungeon, but...simply put, after he did, I just happened to sense a powerful magic coming from the outside world and I left the dungeon in order to investigate. I believe the incident with the spider Demon King in Manaloch caused an uproar in the human world.”

Lunaère delivered this to the others dispassionately.

“Sure...” said Rosemonde with an obvious nod.

No one had been saying anything, it was completely silent, except for the occasional comment from Rosemonde. She might have been doing it to make it easier for Lunaère to talk.

“At that time, on a whim, I decided to check in on how Kanata was doing, and

then I just happened to discover a group of people tailing him. This was of no concern to a cold-hearted lich such as myself, but it appeared these people caused problems within the world whenever they liked...and I disliked that. So, as nothing more than a way to kill time in my eternal life, I discovered their hideout and attacked.”

“Ah, I think I’m understanding it all now,” said Rosemonde with another nod.

She really was kind. This was maybe our seventh take trying to get through Lunaère’s explanation, and it would have taken close to twice as long if it wasn’t for Rosemonde politely nudging her along.

“So, the lich has got lots of whims and coincidences,” said Noble.

“Noble, be quiet for now,” I said and quickly pushed his lid closed.

About half the retakes were because of *him*.

“Um, Kanata, what’s going to happen now? That man with the mask from earlier, isn’t he working for the higher beings? And isn’t he the leader of our enemy? Does this mean we’re safe?” asked Pomera anxiously.

“It’s a bit of a letdown, but...they’re supposedly the masterminds pulling the strings behind the majority of the disasters in this world. So, I don’t think they’ll be coming after me anymore,” I said.

I had originally planned to ask Lunaère for her advice on the Unseen Hand of the Gods and their leader, Veranta. I never expected things to get wrapped up in such an anticlimactic way.

Just then, a voice came out from Noble, despite the fact that I was holding his lid shut.

“Fools... Do you really think you will escape unscathed despite your actions? This isn’t simply hot embers you can brush off yourself. This is a hellfire that will engulf the entire world, and you’ve opened the door to it. The die is cast. There is no going back now.”

All eyes turned toward Noble. I took my hand off his lid, and his mouth

opened wide. Veranta's head slowly rose out from Noble's mouth, his arms and legs still bound.

"My goal was to protect my beloved Locklore...that was all. And yet the lot of you have *destroyed* everything, without deep consideration or even conviction. You don't understand what you're doing or the responsibility that comes with your actions. How could you do something so terrifying yet childish?!"

"Veranta!!!"

"What you are doing is no more than an attempt at double suicide, taking the entirety of Locklore's history with you. Ah...but no, I understand this is simply my own bitterness at having lost. The natural order of things has always made it clear that Locklore would be destroyed if a powerful enough person were to run rampant. We were responsible for managing that, but...it seems we were found lacking. Locklore's fate now rests on your immature personalities and utterly pedestrian love. I no longer hold the reins in my hands. The best I can do is make my decisions without regret."

He was supposedly talking about something incredibly important, but I was having a really hard time following. Maybe because he was popping halfway out of a living treasure chest.

"Noble, can you let him out of there?" I asked.

Noble shook his lid. "We don't know what kind of stuff this guy will get up to if we take our eyes off him. Trust me, this is safer."

"This man...Veranta, he was secretly carrying several abnormal items," said Lunaère. "Noble has a strong resistance to magic, and inside his body is like a separate dimension. It's essentially a powerful barrier, making him perfect for holding dangerous individuals."

"R-right..."

I guess we have no choice then. We can't just let him out of there.



It didn't matter what his convictions were—he was the villain who caused calamity in this world. Besides, there was no way to guarantee he didn't have something hidden up his sleeve.

“Let me put it more simply,” Veranta said. “What made you assume we were the ones pulling the strings when we are nothing more than the higher beings’ agents? It’s not like we have existed since the beginning of Locklore itself, and it isn’t that uncommon for a member of the Unseen Hand to be changed out. The true rulers of this world are the higher beings that control the Unseen Hand.

“The higher beings need the world of Locklore to be a spectacle, and they were simply holding back in order to keep it that way. We, the Unseen Hand of the Gods, were a tool they used for that. But now that it has come to this...the higher beings will have no other choice. They will use this entire world to destroy you, Kanata and Lunaère. This hasn’t stopped just because you defeated someone. It will continue until the world itself has been destroyed. I’m sure even you have considered that possibility if the higher beings are pushed into a corner.”

“...”

Veranta had warned me about this the last time we met. If the higher beings got tired of Locklore, they would wipe out the entire thing...

But my only options were to keep fighting back or to just let them kill me. All I could do was go with the flow and be ready for when the higher beings tried to do something to me.

“I know what will happen,” said Veranta. “After this, the higher beings will shamelessly and brazenly use every pawn on the board to attempt to kill you. It will be hell on Locklore. Are you truly prepared for that?”

“I...” I started, but I couldn’t respond.

Was it really the right thing to keep fighting against the higher beings? I had no doubt that they were tyrannical beings, but they were the ones who kept

Locklore in existence. If I completely went against the higher beings' intentions and continued fighting, I would be dragging everyone in Locklore in with me.

"I am," said Lunaère to Veranta. "The moment I knew about you and your Unseen Hand, Veranta, I resolved myself to protect Kanata, even if it meant making an enemy of the entire world. If there are beings that do whatever they want, causing disasters whenever they want, then they are my sworn enemy and I see no reason to hold back."

Her weakness from before was entirely gone. She turned to me and said, "Kanata, would you rather cave to these people? As far as it sounds, they're coming after me as well. You said you cared for me greatly. I'm going to be in trouble if you don't take responsibility for that and protect me."

"Lunaère-san..."

She must be trying to encourage me, since my morale was fading. She didn't seem embarrassed at all. She looked me right in the eye as she said that.

"A foolish answer. You are only going to drag everything else down with you when you finally die..." Veranta shook his head wearily and let out a heavy sigh.

"Why do you claim to love Locklore so much, then work for the higher beings who trample all over it?" asked Lunaère.

"Do you really believe you can stand against them, lich girl? They manage infinite worlds for their own entertainment. They are an opponent literally of a different dimension. It's not possible to measure how powerful they truly are."

"Why do you assume you can't stand against them? Since it's not possible to measure how powerful they truly are?"

"What?!" cried Veranta, taken off guard by Lunaère's comment. There were a few moments of silence, then after some time, Veranta nearly spat, "You are insane...! Reckless! Thoughtless! How could the fate of Locklore fall in the hands of people like this?!"

"'Reckless,' 'thoughtless.' An odd choice of words. The world is full of

irreplaceable things. You sacrificed some of them for the sake of peace.

Veranta, if you don't understand that, then you've never truly loved someone, have you?" said Lunaère.

Veranta was silent.

Thinking back to everything Veranta had said and done so far, it seemed true he was acting entirely out of the desire to keep Locklore alive. I also doubted he'd never once spared a thought for all the people he'd sacrificed for that. What Lunaère pointed out was likely something he'd already thought about himself.

"Ah ha ha...I really don't stand a chance..." said Pomera with a sad smile as she watched Lunaère. "Let's do it, Kanata. We don't know how great our enemy is, but...I think there's value in trying exactly *because* we don't know. I don't know anything about these higher beings or whatever, but let's beat their butts!"

"I was starting to lose my motivation. Thank you, Lunaère-san, Pomera-san," I said.

They were right: if I gave up on my fight, then they would likely try and kill Lunaère too.

I didn't know if this was the right decision, but if it came down to weighing the entire world against the person I loved the most, well...I didn't want to just hand over her life without fighting back.

"I've made my decision. We've come this far. If the higher beings come to our front doorstep, then we'll just beat them down and chase them back!" I said, my eyes narrowed.

After all, Naiarotop was probably watching me say this from the upper realm. I didn't know what moves he was going to make, but I was going to do everything I could to protect what was important to me.

Chapter 2:

Reniement, the Backwards Man

-1-

NAIAROTOP

IN A VAST, WHITE SPACE, Naiarotop, one of the managers of Locklore, stared blankly into nothing.

“Welp. It’s completely over. Guess this is how it ends...”

His agents on Locklore, the Unseen Hand of the Gods, had been entirely dismantled by Lunaère.

Normally, it would be prohibited to send the Unseen Hand of the Gods to directly fight against Kanata, since the other gods paid so much attention to the travelers. And yet, he’d used that outlawed move to attack Kanbara, only to have Lunaère suddenly come out of left field to send everything back to square one, right when Naiarotop was starting to think about his next steps.

It wouldn’t be difficult for Naiarotop to put Kanata and his friends in their graves if he went to attack himself, but if he did that, Locklore would turn into that “old-fashioned” style of entertainment for the gods where the creators of the world interfered directly. If the managers of Locklore took that approach, then the other gods would quickly lose interest in the world.

That didn’t mean Naiarotop could just leave Kanata and the others alone. He knew that even if letting an extraordinarily powerful human do whatever they wanted greatly increased attention on the world, those sorts of gimmicks for drawing interest didn’t last long.

Even if Kanata and Lunaère did manage to maintain popularity for some time, it was still a huge negative if you considered future gains.

They'd originally planned for Locklore to run for tens of thousands of years, maybe hundreds of thousands. It was great entertainment if a level 5,000 traveler goes off against the gods and wins their pardon—but the problem was what was left after they were gone. No god was going to get excited watching the life of a piddly level 100 traveler after that sort of spectacle. The higher beings were almost entirely omniscient and omnipotent.

They got bored *very* easily.

Naiarotop gave a blasé snap of his fingers. A screen appeared before him. This was the memory sphere which held recordings of all the broadcasts from Locklore.

There, Naiarotop saw Kanata and the others listening to Lunaère in the castle of the Dragon King.

“...Defeat the higher beings? Mere *humans*? How idiotic of them to turn against us. It's like a worm challenging a dragon! If I really wanted to, I could wipe out the whole world, let alone all of you! Damn you!”

Naiarotop scowled unhappily as he listened to what Kanata and Lunaère were saying.

“No, it's because of you stupid, insignificant, little insects that we're even here discussing the possibility of destroying the world! And this place will just disappear without me doing anything. In fact, it'll disappear if I *don't* do anything! How can you get so uppity with your creator!”

Naiarotop expanded the memory sphere and vacantly stared at it, not doing anything in particular other than shouting curses through the screen every once in a while. He *couldn't* do anything.

The five members of the Unseen Hand of the Gods were Naiarotop's most powerful pawns. If they didn't get the job done, then he was stuck.

On top of that, his master the Higher God had stopped contacting him. This normally never happened. Naiarotop thought about what that could mean, and

it seemed likely they were about to axe Locklore as entertainment.

It was only a what-if, but he did think he could have easily brought down Kanata and Lunaère if he'd used the Unseen Hand more effectively. It was his own fault for holding back because he wanted to avoid acting too brazenly, even at this stage. Actually, the command of the five people in the Unseen Hand was terrible as well. The biggest factor was they put off dealing with Lunaère until too late.

The only thing he could say was that, as a result, the whole thing was going down the toilet. If that wasn't the case, he could have eliminated Kanata and his friends long ago, before they went into overtime like this.

"It's been a while since I've checked Divinitter..." muttered Naiarotop as he pinched space between his fingers and pulled his arm up.

A huge number of screens opened around him showing an endless stream of posts on the social media platform popular among the gods. Naiarotop hadn't checked his feed in a long, long time.

In the gods' world, popularity and entertainment were everything. The gods had used magic to eliminate all the problems that living creatures faced, meaning the only thing left in their lives was the pursuit of fame and leisure. It wasn't uncommon for gods to increase their social standing among their peers by providing entertainment.

Divinitter was bursting with snide remarks toward Naiarotop ever since the Kanata situation started getting worse and his master hung him out to dry. This was an unbearable insult for Naiarotop, since he was also a god that so valued popularity.

But he was now on the precipice where they would decide if Locklore would be erased or not. Naiarotop had no idea what would happen to his social standing if that happened. He would likely be forever deprived of a good chance to ascend to Upper Godhood—and if things went particularly poorly, he might be eliminated along with Locklore as well.

The Upper Gods saw the Lower Gods, like Naiarotop, as nothing more than labor to be used and thrown away, so there was very little incentive to keep Naiarotop around after his name was tarnished in the incident.

So with nothing better to do, he decided to check what the other gods were saying about Locklore right now. It didn't matter how bad Naiarotop performed—so long as the others were getting entertainment out of Locklore, it probably wasn't going to get erased. But it was obvious that Locklore's life span as entertainment was rapidly waning; if he did make a wrong move, he might just make the situation worse.

"Trending hashtags on Divinitter... Number one, '#Lunaère.' Two, '#Kanata.' Three is '#NaiaroFlop.' Talk about brutal. So, it's actually more topical..." Naiarotop's emotionless eyes followed the stream of characters.

They weren't just trending in the short term either, they were edging into long term popularity. Divinitter was a place for the troublesome gods to gather, those with far too much time on their hands who were starved for entertainment. But that didn't mean opinions on the platform strayed too far from general opinions throughout the entire divine population. It looked like Locklore's notability was still skyrocketing.

Naiarotop read the lines of text in Divinitter.

"Naia's so incompetent"

"He's gotta be a genius to screw things up this bad."

"cant wait to see what he messes up next"

A lot of the time people spent talking about Locklore was dedicated to insulting Naiarotop. It was only natural that Naiarotop would be subjected to more ridicule once his master set things up as "Kanata vs. Naiarotop," but it was odd how much of it there really was.

"They're saying whatever they want because it's someone else..." muttered Naiarotop.

“Are the people running Locklore complete morons?”

“I noticed it before the whole Kanata thing even started”

“It’s gotta be faked, just to get viewers. There’s no way anyone’s this inept. They don’t fool me, I’m too smart.”

Naiarotop flung the Divinitter screens away before he could stop himself.

“There’d be no point in that, it’d only shorten the life span of a world that’s lasted for this long! I’ve put a hundred times more thought into managing Locklore than all of you ever had in your heads!!!” he screamed at the screens, but there was no response. Though, most of the gods who spent all their time on Divinitter were Higher Gods with a decent amount of authority, so it would have been bad for him if they *could* hear him.

Naiarotop’s shoulders trembled with rage for a while, but he touched a screen and opened another page.

Nothing would come from him getting angry from only researching his own name. Besides, the reception of Locklore as a whole was much more important to him than his own reputation.

“is kanata seriously gonna beat the higher beings? im getting excited!!”

“Lunaère-chan’s so brave and cute!”

“Yeah! Take down those higher beings, acting like they’re gods!”

“...That’s us, you idiot.”

There were far more posts about Locklore than Naiarotop had ever seen. The lack of thought in the posts was standard for Divinitter, but there were a lot of people who viewed Locklore favorably.

“I’m glad a lot of the posts seem to be focusing on the future, at least...”

Naiarotop was only learning about this now because he had stayed away from the divine net for so long, but Locklore’s popularity was increasing at a rate orders of magnitudes greater than he’d imagined.

It looked like the gods were taking Locklore as a story about a traveler standing against the gods in an attempt to win his freedom.

“Is there maybe...a way to make this last long-term...? How...? How can I shift it to long-term? And why isn’t my master contacting me at such an important time?”

“You have committed quite the egregious mistake...my servant,” came the voice of the Upper God, as though summoned. “To think, the Unseen Hand of the Gods would be entirely defeated. I thought I made it clear to you that that was your last chance.”

“Ah, Master! Where have you been?!” said Naiarotop, as if criticizing his boss.

“If the Unseen Hand failed, it would mark the end of Locklore. That was what I intended. I decided there was nothing else I could do, even if I sacrificed you—that it would be better to find a way to end this neatly, rather than allow the endless repetition of foolish moves to bring shame.”

“H-huh?!” Naiarotop was lost for words when he heard his master’s heartless declaration.

His master had threatened him plenty that if the Unseen Hand of the Gods was defeated, that was it, but Naiarotop still had hope that something could be done. It just didn’t seem real that Locklore was about to be erased.

“Y-you’ve got to be kidding! It doesn’t matter how you try and fix it up, if you try to neatly get rid of Locklore, it will look like we’re trying to run because of this mess. It’ll be the end of me! I’m the *face* of Locklore! A-are you saying I’m done for because of these worms?!” cried Naiarotop with all he had in the direction his master’s voice came from.

“Ahem. However, the situation has changed. In truth, *you know who* called for me. For you...this is a favorable turn of events. Not necessarily for me.”

“*He* called for you?!” Naiarotop’s face contorted in sheer shock.

If you said *you know who* to a god, there was only one person you could

mean. He was the genesis of all—the *highest* of all the gods.

Since the gods had resolved all issues with the use of powerful magic, reputation and entertainment became everything for them. And entertainment in particular was far more important than it was in human society. That was why a powerful individual might step in on how one particular show played out.

“He said he looks forward to what will happen with Locklore—and Kanata Kanbara. He warned me not to force a boring ending just for management’s sake. Which means I am no longer able to make up some reason to eliminate the world and flee.”

“M-meaning you’re giving me another chance?”

“From your perspective, it means your life has been given an extension. From mine...well, I have simply been forced to bear a risky, unnecessary, drawn-out battle. However, that does not mean I will allow you, a petty god, to interfere directly. The Unseen Hand has fallen. Are there any other pawns at your disposal?”

“Other pawns...?” asked Naiarotop uncertainly.

Even if he ignored Kanata for now, there was no one Naiarotop knew who was a higher level than Lunaère. The Unseen Hand could have managed if they’d found a strategy, but their forces had been split, and they were then destroyed in a surprise attack. There were no other pawns that Naiarotop could think of.

“Those three should be capable of ensuring Lunaère and Kanata are put down,” said his master.

“Those three...? Wait, are you telling me to send those criminals sealed away in the other dimension?!” Naiarotop paled.

There had been three people in Locklore’s history who had greatly skewed the power balance of the world. They rejected the higher beings’ attempts to appease them and wanted only to destroy the world with their overwhelming

power.

But Locklore was essentially a show that followed the activities of travelers from other worlds. Naiarotop and his master insisted they interfered with the world as little as possible, but they had space to deal with locals, natives to the world who weren't travelers, assuming they did it discreetly.

Naiarotop had distracted the gods who enjoyed watching Locklore as entertainment, then forced the power balance of the world back into place by sealing those three people in an alternate dimension.

"I know I sealed them away instead of killing them...but if we send them out now, we'll be exposing the fact that we have always interfered with the world! And Locklore won't survive if we use them!"

All three of them were utterly uncontrollable. It wasn't going to end with them just killing Kanata. Besides, it would make it obvious that they secretly sealed away dangerous locals from the world, then openly released them at their own convenience. That would completely destroy any pretense of the management not interfering with Locklore.

"Yes. If we use them, that is the end... Locklore will be ravaged. There is no need to point out how over-meddling this would be, and how there would be no point in eliminating Kanata if Locklore were to end anyway...but *you know who* wants a magnificent conclusion. Locklore is out of control, so think only of providing *him* with enjoyment."

"B-but, weren't you going to eliminate me if Locklore was destroyed? If that's what you're planning, then I don't want to take on any more pointless shame!"

"Do not worry. Even if Locklore were to end, it is a great honor to provide satisfactory entertainment to *him*. I will give you the opportunity to clear your name."

Naiarotop's master wasn't changing what he promised. Trust was important between gods. If his master said he would save him, then Naiarotop could avoid being eliminated along with Locklore so long as he put in the work.

“I-I understand. If that’s the case, I’ll give it my all until the end. And...I also would like to directly orchestrate Kanata’s death, since he dragged my career through the mud.”

“Smash both Locklore and Kanata Kanbara to pieces...and give *you know who* the best bad ending ever. Stage the greatest tragic love story for the poor traveler who turned against the gods and dragged an entire world to its grave in the process.”

“I will. Those criminals won’t lose against Lunaère. I will show Kanata Kanbara a hell worse than anything he’s seen so far. Which is what he gets for making a fool of me!” Naiarotop gave a somber grin, a smile filled with malice and rage.

“But...you are aware that if Kanata Kanbara is to win, we will have no other moves left,” his master reminded him. “We will have lost all methods for interfering with Locklore, and we will be forced to make an excuse and end the world along with Kanata...all while *you know who* is watching. We cannot allow such a bland conclusion. We also cannot simply leave the world running—there is so much cost in the upkeep, after all.”

“We won’t be able to interfere with it, erase it, or maintain it...? What do you plan on doing in that situation?”

“We will be utterly trapped in a corner, unable to do anything. Do not allow us to fall into such a trap. If that were to happen, even I, as a Higher God, would not be able to place all the blame on you and run. In addition to the frustration of the other gods, we would incur *his* displeasure.”

-2-

DEEP IN MONSTER TERRITORY, where no human dared step foot, was a massive tower known as the Arm of the Gods. It was there, within, that the five members of the Unseen Hand of the Gods gathered inside its halls.

There was Ramiel, Ruler of the Skies, the ancestor of the dragonkin, and a

criminal by their accounts as well.

There was Nobunaga, the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven, a man boasting a demonic face and a gigantic body.

There was Sophia, the World's Recordkeeper, a beautiful high elf who had lived for countless years.

There was Zero, the Silent Void, whose body was hidden beneath a black robe, his identity unknown.

And there was Veranta, the Ruler of the World, their leader, and a masked man.

"Hmph, to think we would all find ourselves beneath the same roof again." A self-deriding laugh emanated from below his mask...while his upper half was sticking out of Noble's mouth.

"Please don't think about resisting at this point," said Lunaère, sitting in front of the five members of the Unseen Hand on the opulent throne that had been Veranta's.

"I'm not sure how we could possibly resist now after being beaten so completely," said Veranta. "You're aware of everything I had at my disposal. We have no chance of winning against you now. Most of all, we've already been abandoned by the higher beings. There has been no communication from them whatsoever. It's likely the higher beings will launch some form of attack on the world after determining they have lost their tools for adjusting it. As ridiculous as it is, our only option now is to work with you and fight back against the higher beings."

Veranta let out a tired sigh.

Apparently Lunaère had bound Nobunaga and Zero in special ropes after she defeated them and locked them inside this building using some special barrier. Then we got permission from Ridler to bring Ramiel out here, and Lunaère went herself to hunt down Sophia, even though she'd half defected and run from the

Unseen Hand.

I stood beside Lunaère along with Pomera, Philia, and Rosemonde as I looked into the faces of the five members of the Unseen Hand.

Veranta told me about them in his introductions, but I'd never seen most of them before. Ramiel was the only one who came to fight me directly, and the remaining four were beaten by Lunaère before I knew it. Besides Ramiel and Veranta, they were strangers. I'd found myself standing against them all of a sudden, and just as fast the whole ordeal was over.

We came here to the Arm of the Gods so Lunaère could recover Nobunaga and Zero and get information and support for subduing the higher beings.

The Unseen Hand of the Gods was in contact with the higher beings through some sort of correspondence, making them one of the few sources of information on the Gods.

"Well, I was waiting for my chance to toss Ridler aside and make my break for it, hee hee hee, but it looks like that won't be necessary. I just hope your decision to rely on me won't come back to bite you later," said Ramiel, her wings spread wide as she hovered in the air, a hand covering her mouth as she giggled. "I mean, the five of us are here. Veranta, stop waffling, let's kick her ass already—"

"Ramiel, be quiet. You can only say such things because you weren't there," said Veranta, curtly cutting Ramiel off. "In order to win against Lunaère, we would need to have a great intel advantage, create a situation that benefited us, and *then* launch a surprise attack when we are in peak condition. We were unable to do that. She discovered the cards we held...and now she holds our lives. Besides, the higher beings have already cut us off."

Veranta gestured his hands inside Noble's mouth to show he had given up.

"Give it up, dragon girl!" said Nobunaga. "That lady's not something you'd ever be able to handle."

“Huh? The wild ruler of Yamato is pretty well behaved now,” said Ramiel.

“Because I was defeated easily in a face-to-face battle. It’s only natural for me to join sides with the powerful and do as they say, just like I’ve subjugated all the people who came at me before. Besides, I wasn’t happy being forced to take on a boring responsibility like the world’s balance. But this gets my blood pumping... We’re going to kill the *gods*!” Nobunaga’s wicked face twisted into a disconcerting grin.

I was concerned that the Unseen Hand of the Gods might attack me again if we brought them all together and released them, but I guess that was less of a concern now.

Their leader, Veranta, had essentially decided he was going to cooperate with us. He couldn’t kill us himself, so he gave up on the pretext that the next best option for protecting Locklore was to support us. He kept saying spiteful things like, “It’s your fault Locklore is in danger,” but he wasn’t doing anything else since he lost his argument with Lunaère. He probably had a change of heart.

Lunaère tracked down Sophia, who had already broken away from the Unseen Hand. And Nobunaga suffered a terrible loss against Lunaère in a one-on-one fight, so he was behaving better than what I expected from what I heard about him.

This Zero person was supposedly just someone who went along with everything Veranta said. Ramiel wasn’t content with the situation...but she wasn’t going to go out of her way to start a fight if four of the five members of the Unseen Hand were already on our side.

“Veranta, if you’re not planning on fighting us, then can you tell us what you think the higher beings are going to do?” I asked.

“I have absolutely no idea. If they wish, they could likely erase the entire world with the snap of their fingers. If we pray that won’t happen, then our only option is to watch for their next move. ...*Actually*, perhaps we could at least recover *those*. I see no reason to leave them if we stand against the higher

beings now.”

“Those? What are *those*?”

“Their pawns,” said Veranta shortly.

“Pawns...?” I felt like Veranta had used that word before.

“The Unseen Hand has sown the seeds of chaos throughout the various regions of the world so that we may cause exciting incidents when the higher beings order us to—or when we wished to. Some pawns were placed by other agents of the higher beings, and some of the old ones that the higher beings have already used. It might be easier for you to understand if I told you that the Lord of Merchants Grede was one of these pawns.”

“Mister Grede...” murmured Philia as she glared at Veranta.

“Going even further back, even I...even *you*, Zolophilia, the God of Fear, are one of these pawns. But on a broader scale, this entire world is a game for them. So, I won’t tell you it would be wrong to hold a grudge against us for that—just that there is nothing to gain from us standing against each other now,” Veranta said to Philia.

“And what do you mean when you say we should recover these pawns?” I asked.

“These pawns are like bombs that the higher beings can detonate whenever they like in order to add excitement to the stage that is Locklore. If the higher beings are going to meddle in Locklore from here on out, they will likely use these pawns in some way. I may have been the one to place them, but there is no benefit to me to leave them now that I stand against the higher beings. We won’t be able to keep up with the small ones, but we should at least destroy the ones that have the potential to go over level 1,000.”

I was finally starting to understand. There was a good chance the higher beings were going to use these pawns as weapons to attack Locklore. Getting rid of them would mean greatly reducing the ways the higher beings could

meddle in the world.

“They are one of the few methods the higher beings have for interfering. We should secure them as quickly as possible,” said Veranta. “If we twiddle our thumbs, we could find they have forcefully strengthened some dangerous individuals. ...Or brought them together and created a new Unseen Hand of the Gods. Recovering the pawns is a battle against time. It would be inefficient for you to tackle this on your own.”

“Meaning, we should free all of you and have you track down the pawns...? Lunaère-san...do you think we can really trust this person completely? They might try to contact the higher beings again...” I asked, but Veranta replied before she could say anything.

“I can’t do that. Lunaère took all my items for my Omnipotent Alchemy, and that was my strength. I could recreate them if I wanted to, but it would be a difficult task to gather the materials. Besides, the lich already knows the limits of my gift skill.” He then turned to the other members of the Unseen Hand and said, “Sopia, Nobunaga, and Zero have all had their spirits broken as well. The only one who thinks they can still beat you is Ramiel, who is not very high level and has no particularly special capabilities.”

“What’d you say?” said Ramiel as she glared at Veranta with death in her eyes.

“Regardless... We were Locklore’s last defenders. Not even I know what the higher beings will do to it now. The only option I have for continuing to protect Locklore is to join forces with you.”

We definitely did need people and information, meaning, unfortunately, we needed the Unseen Hand. We didn’t really have any other option but to trust them.

“There are twelve pawns we should recover immediately,” said Veranta. “Three in particular...the Dragon Vortex, which enacts miracles in the world, Cocytus, the prison for monsters, and the World Tree, which protects the spirit

world. We can't simply destroy these. Our only choice is to secure them and repel any attempts by the higher beings to interfere."

Veranta unfurled a map of the world as he explained things, drawing circles to mark locations with significant pawns.

"There are some lesser pawns that Sophia can easily recover through her authority. The Sophia Trading Company should use its power to handle what it can, gathering them together and destroying them immediately. Zero, Ramiel, and I will guard the Dragon Vortex," said Veranta, then he looked up at us. "I want Nobunaga with his high level...as well as the rest of you to destroy the remaining pawns. That will significantly reduce the space in which the higher beings have to maneuver if they want to meddle with Locklore."

"Just full of help now, aren't you?" muttered Rosemonde. "You sure you're really okay with that? If we get the higher beings completely backed into a corner, they might just erase the world instead..."

"The higher beings are the ones who created this world. It only makes sense to assume they can also easily eliminate it if they so wished. But starting that conversation will open an endless debate. The only thing we can do to resolve this situation is to take away any chance the higher beings have of interfering. The one safe method for ensuring the continuation of the world is to kill all of you and make peace with the higher beings... But that ship has sailed."

Veranta let out a heavy sigh and shrugged, then continued. "Besides...after speaking with you, part of me wants to try. I have spent thousands of years using humans as toys to act out a comical puppet show for the higher beings. I'm tired. It's dangerous for the world, but...if there is a way to free Locklore from them, I want to try. Even if that means the eventual destruction of Locklore."

"Veranta..."

I don't know what to do... He's made up his mind and is giving this big speech about how he's going to help us...but it's all falling flat because he's talking from

inside Noble's mouth.

I didn't think he was going to betray us after giving us all this information, and we needed his help if we were going to go ahead with our attempt to recover the pawns. Maybe we should have let him out of Noble.

Lunaère craned her neck to look at the map, then nodded curtly. "Let's divide them among us and get to work. Kanata and I will go around recovering—"

"If we're dividing, it would be better for you two to go separately," interrupted Veranta. "The two of you together are unnecessarily powerful. And if those other three went on their own, they might be the ones killed instead. Zolophilia's power is nothing to underestimate, but she is too immature. There is also the possibility that our enemy will set a trap and capture her, then use the Sand of Dreams against us. She should stay with Kanata. I'm also concerned about Pomera's lack of levels. Rosemonde...my apologies, but it would be best if you waited elsewhere. You won't be able to go along and we have no time to train your levels up."

Everything he said made sense. Maybe it really was best for Pomera, Philia, and me to stay together like we had been so far. Lunaère could probably give a good enough fight on her own. If she got serious, even I would just hold her back if I was with her. I didn't think there was an enemy in Locklore that could give her a run for her money.

"Uh...b-but, I just... I haven't seen Kanata in so long that I, uh—oh, that's it! Kanata and I are the ones being directly targeted by the higher beings, so we should work together!" said Lunaère.

"No. They likely consider us all enemies at this point... And we might as well acknowledge the fact that having *any* of our members captured by the higher beings would hurt us. Sophia in particular has the influence to shift the world, and Zero has dangerous power. But if we let fear of that force us into inaction, then we can only fight a defensive battle against the higher beings, who already have the overwhelming advantage. We will never free Locklore from them that

way,” said Veranta, his voice even.

“B-but, w-well...umm...e-even so, they’ll be after us first, and...we shouldn’t split up...”

It was no good. Everything Veranta said was utterly sensible and powerful. Lunaère must have been struggling too, because she kept stammering. It was clear she was just talking while she tried to make up an excuse.

“Are you seriously trying to make a *date* out of the fight with the gods that will decide the fate of Locklore?” asked Veranta.

“H-how *dare* you say that! I’m just suggesting it because I’m worried about Kanata!” cried Lunaère.

“Lunaère-san...I appreciate it, but I think we should listen to Veranta! I’ll be fine!” I said.

“It’s not like I was thinking at all that it would be fun to go sightseeing around the world with just the two of us while we have an important goal! Don’t imply that!”

“Veranta didn’t even say anything close to that! Look, we can do that afterward! Once it’s all over, we’ll take all the time we want to go see the entire world!” I took Lunaère’s hand as I tried to convince her.

“Th-that wasn’t my intention! I-I don’t have any interest in the outside world anyway...a-and it’s not like my unholy impurity is completely sealed away, so if I’m with you, you won’t be able to fit in in society. I want you to live a normal life!”



“...She’s a handful, isn’t she?” said Noble with a sigh.

Anyway...it was decided in the end that I would go with Pomera and Philia to travel to the various regions and recover the pawns.

“Nothing is more important than speed, here. You should head out the moment we decide your duties,” said Veranta, and I suddenly remembered something.

I’d gotten three items as prizes when I defeated the Dragon King in the Garden of the Dragons: Alverenarod, which had been used by a high-elven queen, the Necronomicon, which was a book on death magic, and the Ravia Tablet, a stone engraved with the words of a sage from the past.

The Ravia Tablet was a record of magic used by a higher being, analyzed using the gift skill of a traveler from long ago. I couldn’t work it out at all, but Lunaère might be able to understand something. If she could discover its meaning, it might turn into a tool we could fight back against the gods.

“Before we go, there’s something I want to give you, Lunaère-san,” I said.

“Huh? A-a present, from you?!” said Lunaère in a shrill cry.

“Actually, it’s not...really that kind of thing... I wanted to ask you to read this. ...Sorry.”

“Oh... Right, o-of course. Considering what’s going on...” This time, her voice sounded obviously disappointed.

I-I’ll have to think of something when this all calms down. Though, Lunaère could get anything she wanted with force, so I don’t really know what she would want.

“Dimension Pocket,” I said. A magic circle formed, and the Ravia Tablet popped out of it. “This is it.”

I placed it on the floor and Veranta let out a small cry of joy.

“Ah-hah... It appears this tablet was created by someone with a deep understanding of magic. Hm, all other such objects I have seen in the past, I was capable of understanding after some inspection, but this... I was blind to such a thing existing in the world. How intriguing...where did you obtain this?”

Lunaère touched the tablet. “...It seems to be some sort of barrier spell. I wouldn’t even be able to use a spell of this scale. It’s like magic from an entirely different world...which must mean, was this something used by a higher being?”

“D-did you say this is the record of a spell used by a higher being?!” cried Veranta. “If so, and if we can manage to decode it, it might become a significant method for holding the higher beings at bay. I had half given up on this hopeless fight, but...it seems there is more of a chance than I thought.”

“I’ve not even seen anything this complex. For now, leave it with me and I’ll try to work it out, but I don’t know how long it will take,” said Lunaère.

I didn’t think this would make Lunaère say something like that. I was secretly expecting her to be able to take on even the higher beings as she was.

But that didn’t change the fact that the Ravia Tablet seemed to be a valuable item to have.

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“**K**ANATA. I would like you to destroy the Staff of the Saint, located in the holy city of Luperm. It is held beneath the temple there,” said Veranta as he pointed to a spot on the map.

“Is it a dangerous pawn?” I asked.

“Yes. The Staff of the Saint was used by Saint Jonas two thousand years ago, and his soul now resides within the object. Jonas’s teachings became the foundation for the

state religion of this kingdom. It has now formed into the widespread faith known as Jonacism. And because of that worship, the Staff of the Saint has obtained even greater power than it had when Jonas was alive. However, due to the tragedy surrounding his death—and the many years that have passed—his once pure soul has lost all its personality. There is no telling what might happen if someone with ill intent were to obtain the Staff. Even I would be hesitant to meddle with the Staff, if the situation weren't what it is. Since this holy relic is difficult to deal with, I suggest destroying it rather than taking control of it."

"You sound like this has nothing to do with you, but...this person was someone else you set up? Just like Grede?" I asked.

"We were desperate. Locklore wasn't as stable then as it is now. The world's destruction was imminent if we let up at all. Now if you are finished with your complaints, then listen carefully. I never expected Jonas's teachings to spread as widely as they have. I cannot even imagine how high his level has become, meaning it would be incredibly dangerous if an agent of the higher beings obtained the Staff. You must head out as quickly as possible."

Casting blame about Veranta won't help at this point. The only thing I can really do right now is do what Veranta says and go destroy this Staff of the Saint, I thought.

"But, if you don't know how high a level he's gotten, wouldn't it be better to send Lunaère-san?" I asked.

"The Staff of the Saint has lost its personality. It shouldn't be a significant issue to handle...as long as you make no mistakes. And there are *several* other pawns I want to leave to the lich." Veranta glanced toward Lunaère.

"There's more than one pawn that only Lunaère-san can deal with?! Are you entirely sure you guys had complete control over all these things you tossed about?!"

"...We were ordered to place this many, even if we couldn't control them all.

We had to cause incidents at regular intervals, after all, and we didn't know which pawn would be ready when."

"That's just a mess..." I hung my head and sighed. Though, it was because of this sloppiness that we even had an opening to move against the higher beings.

"One other thing. Luperm is dangerous. If it becomes widely known that you are attempting to destroy the Staff of the Saint, it could cause chaos throughout the entire world. This mission requires a certain amount of discretion and interpersonal skills. Because of that, I have decided the lich is not suited to this, as she is not used to the surface world."

"Right," I said. If that was his reason, then I had no direct argument. "But, does that mean we'll need to negotiate with the Church of Jonas? I'm not sure I can manage that..."

"Don't worry. You just have to ask for Cardinal Wardell," said Sophia, the high-elven woman who I'd just learned was a member of the Unseen Hand.

"Cardinal Wardell...?" I asked.

"He's a cowardly, greedy, philandering, corrupt member of the clergy. The only thing good about him is his face, birth, and judgment. So he should listen to reason. He's a long-haired pretty boy with a thing for gaudy decorations. You'll know him when you see him."

"Okay..."

She was really laying into this Wardell guy. Honestly, it was making me *not* want to meet him. Did I really have to negotiate with someone like that to get the Staff of the Saint?

"I actually met with Cardinal Wardell not that long ago. It might be better for me to go...but considering who I am, I have to get the Sophia Trading Company on the move to recover some other pawns that only we can get. I'll write you a letter of introduction though, so use that. He'll be more than willing once you mention my company. Just get him to swap it out with some fake, that'll do the

job. You'll likely need money for the negotiations, so I'll give you a hundred billion gold for now. If he complains, just tell him the company will pay him more later and get him to agree to that much for now."

"A h-hundred billion...!"

That was an absurd amount of money. Well...this was a holy relic of a massive religion whose roots stretched throughout the entire world. If this was something you could solve with money, then that might be on the cheap side.

I'd honestly thought Sophia was a minor league member of the Unseen Hand since I heard she was the first to go down against Lunaère before she disappeared, but she might actually be the most dangerous of them all.

"I-I'm feeling a little reluctant...to go after this Staff. If we do something wrong, we'll end up major criminals, won't we?" said Pomera uneasily.

"...All the other pawns seem dangerous too. This is all there is, we can't do much about it," I said with a sigh.

Considering the list of dangerous pawns Veranta explained to us and the assignments he gave, I agreed that we were probably most suited to taking on the Staff of the Saint.

The object itself was dangerous...but we weren't certain how dangerous. There was a low probability of it actually going on a rampage. The worst-case scenario was we would become worldwide criminals, but that was true of all the other pawns as well.

Besides, the members of the Unseen Hand of the Gods itself already had Ramiel, who was ostracized from dragon society, so it was hard to tell if everyone in the Unseen Hand were world rulers or world criminals.

IN THE UPPER REALM, Naiarotop was in an expanse of white.

He had summoned two people there. They were both bound in chains, with shackles on their hands and feet.

One of the two was a tall, gaunt man in a dark red robe and with utterly despondent eyes.

The other was over twenty feet tall and clearly not human. His skin was gray, he had wicked claws and horns, and a pair of black wings stretched from his back.

“And here you are...two of the three unwanted children of Locklore. Reniement, the Backwards Man, and Lucifer, the Fallen Angel,” said Naiarotop.

“Naiarotop, you bastard! You kept me—*me!*—in that totally empty place for how many thousands of years?! What’s wrong with you?! I’m gonna butcher you!” howled Lucifer, his fangs bared.

The chains binding Lucifer glowed brighter, rapidly increasing the weight of his body until he collapsed to the ground.

“You lying ass! You told me I could do whatever I wanted to in that world, didn’t you?! But then I got in your way, and you had the balls to do this?! You won’t get away with it!” he roared, eyes bloodshot.

“I was concerned you might have gone insane. I’m relieved to see you haven’t changed a bit,” said Naiarotop with an exasperated sigh.

There had been three people in the history of Locklore that had seriously attempted to destroy the world. The managers of Locklore set traps to capture them and since death would be too kind a punishment for them, their souls were locked in another dimension for near eternity.

Locklore management called them the Eternal Convicts. Up until now, Locklore’s management hid the Eternal Convicts from the eyes of the other gods. But now they would call them back to Locklore to finally bring this Kanata issue to a clean end. Reniement and Lucifer were two of the three Convicts.

Lucifer was a demon originally charged by Naiarotop with making adjustments to the world. But he abused his authority, slipped from the higher beings' notice, and used his power to level up. In the end, he caused several wide-scale changes to the world for his own arbitrary reasons, before trying to destroy the world.

The man in the red robe—that was Reniement. He was human in the beginning, but there was a deep darkness in his heart.

He became an apostle of Saint Jonas in an attempt to hold back the secret madness inside him and traveled the world with Saint Jonas to spread his teachings. But when he learned that the higher beings were controlling Locklore for nothing more than their entertainment, his faith faltered.

He underwent training that a normal human would be incapable of understanding, using every method possible to gain more power. He outwitted the Unseen Hand of the Gods at the time and brought the world to the brink of destruction, until the higher beings eventually intervened and forced him out of Locklore.

“Have you calmed down now, fiend?” said Reniement.

“What the hell did you say?” said Lucifer.

“The higher beings have control over every aspect of us. The fact that they went out of their way to call us here means they might have something beneficial to us... Perhaps we should hear them out.”

“You’re in the same damn boat as me, aren’t you? What’s with this half-assed reaction?”

“No... I was aware of more than one instance where people stood in the higher beings' way and had everything sent at them until they were taken down. Then they were given the most extreme forms of punishment. I was aware of the eternal hell awaiting me.” Reniement brought his hands together.

“I don’t get what you’re saying. It basically sounds like you intentionally got

yourself locked up.”

“There is no better place to hone my meditation.” Reniement’s mouth twisted up in a disconcerting grin. Lucifer grimaced at what Reniement said, though so did Naiarotop. “I know, oh higher being, that there is a traveler from another world, one who evades even your grasp. And now...Locklore is on the verge of destruction. Am I wrong?”

“Reniement, I was certain I sealed away all your powers,” said Naiarotop.

“Ha ha ha! Ah...but I have always known. I have *always* known! You would never call on me for any other reason. So long as I was in that eternal hell, I would one day be invited to the world’s final moments. I so longed to see it with my own eyes.”

“R-right...that makes this quicker to explain, then.” Naiarotop pressed a hand to his temple, then got his expression under control to glare at Reniement and Lucifer. “I will loosen your bonds. I will grant you freedom within the scope of what I want. But if you turn against me, your body will grow heavy, and you will rot away. Do whatever you wish if that’s what you want.”

Naiarotop raised his arms, and a magic circle appeared, reducing the glow of the chains on Reniement and Lucifer.

“I give you only one order...kill all mortals that turn against me, against the gods. You are permitted to make any sacrifice necessary for that,” said Naiarotop.

“Huh... I’m not thrilled to be your lap dog again, but pretty nice of you to let me crush Locklore,” said Lucifer. “Ha ha ha! Looks like the management’s finally got some fire in the end! I couldn’t even dream of being allowed to run wild, but now, you’re letting me get in on this celebration? Just don’t assume it’ll end up how you want it to.” He ran his tongue over his lips.

“Oh, Heavenly One...I have long awaited the day you would bestow this mission upon me,” said Reniement.

“Renient, I have a further special request...for you to go to the holy city of Luperm,” said Naiarotop.

“Oh? And what sort of place is that?”

“The grave of your master. The offensive traveler in question is actually just on his way to rob your master’s grave.”

“Oh my...that sounds like a long story made short. Well, then, after all this time...I will go see my master once again.”

Renient’s gash of a mouth turned up into a smile.

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WE LEFT THE Arm of the Gods, hopped on Wolzottl, and went toward the Holy City of Luperm, where the Staff of the Saint lay. Wolzottl rushed through the air, the scenery slowly changing around us.

“It looks like that’s it over there...” I murmured as I gazed at the ground in the distance.

Ahead was a city surrounded by massive stone walls. It seemed like a somber place with tall rows of buildings. This was definitely the holy city of Luperm.

“I hope negotiations with Cardinal Wardell go well...”

According to Sophia, Cardinal Wardell was still a young man, despite his station, and was both greedy and rash. She said he was the kind of person who would do any dirty deed so long as you paid the right price, but I wasn’t certain things would go that smoothly. Even if Sophia herself couldn’t come with us, I would have liked one of her people to accompany us for the negotiations.

Wolzottl left as we got closer to the city gates, and Pomeria, Philia, and I went into the holy city proper. Walking around, we saw a lot of people wearing dark, modest clothing. Angel statues were dotted around town. There was a decent amount of foot traffic, yet it was calm and quiet with pleasant scenery.

“It seems like there’s a lot of religious people here, probably since it’s a holy place for Jonacism,” I said. It was the home of the Staff of the Saint, which housed Jonas’s soul, but this town was also his birthplace and where he lost his life.

“Our clothing...makes us stand out a lot, doesn’t it?” said Pomera nervously.

“I thought I was just thinking too much about it, but...it does seem like we’re drawing attention,” I said, glancing around.

I felt like we were being looked at like oddities as we walked around the city. We’d rushed into the mission without taking the time to research the city’s culture before coming.

“Hey, you lot there...what’s with the flashy clothing?” came a voice as a woman in armor called to us while we walked around. She had long blond hair, silver armor, and a black cape. “Today’s the day our Lord Jonas passed... It’s Luperm custom to mourn his death, live modestly, and gather in the evening in front of the temple where His Holiness is to give prayer. But all of you are wearing these garish get ups.”

“I-I’m so sorry. We’re traveling...” I said with a bow.

“Oh, yeah? If you were intentionally messing around like that, I would have cut you down on the spot. Go buy something appropriate in the next shop you see.”

“Thank you for the warning. Um, you are...?”

“Lisl. A Holy Knight. My job’s keeping an eye on corrupt outsiders like you.”

“I-I know our outfits were caused by a lack of education on our part, but...I don’t think you have to go that far,” said Pomera with a frown.

Lisl snorted with laughter. “It’s always the rubbish from outside that cause incidents. People who came here to visit because they have faith aren’t about to forget what today is. Whether they’re here for silly sightseeing, are greedy merchants, or some sort of burglar...they’re all worthless. Don’t screw around.”

“Th-that’s a bit rude isn’t it? We’re here for a very important...” said Pomera, but then her shoulders jerked. “Uh, ha ha ha, we’re just here for some sightseeing.”

She gave an awkward smile and pressed a hand against her head. She must have remembered we came to destroy the Staff of the Saint. Out of the three options Lisl gave, we *were* sort of burglars.

“You’re an unpleasant bunch,” said Lisl. “Just be careful how you act around here.”

I brought a hand to my chin in thought. I had been trying to decide where to take Sophia’s letter, but a Holy Knight might actually have a position close to Cardinal Wardell.

“You’re...you’re a Holy Knight, right? Would you be able to take something to Cardinal Wardell?” I asked.

“What? Cardinal Wardell is an important person in charge of Luperm’s military. Being a Holy Knight, I’ve met with him a few times, but he’s a busy man on a day like today.”

“I’m very sorry, but we have an important matter to deal with.” I took Sophia’s letter from my breast pocket.

“Red and gold decoration...a wax seal of a long ear...this is from the Sophia Trading Company, isn’t it? So, you are merchants after all. His Eminence isn’t going to meet with lowly people like you,” said Lisl in exasperation.

“Kanata...I feel like something doesn’t fit what we were told,” Pomera whispered anxiously in my ear.

Maybe the man did a really good job of hiding his true nature. Maybe we needed to find someone closer to him, or maybe force our way to him directly...? No matter what we did though, it all seemed like it would turn into a hassle.

“We already know where the Staff of the Saint is. Should we just go right

there and destroy it? We can't spend a lot of time on this, and I think we could do it right so our reputations don't get damaged," I said, lowering my voice so Lisl couldn't hear.

"Kanata?!" cried Pomeria.

"Kanata, you're scary...! Philia thinks it's bad to do bad things too..." said Philia, squeezing the hem of my robe with tears in her eyes as she tried to convince me.

"Th-that's not what I mean! Just, it doesn't change the fact that we came to do something bad in the first place! And...well, if people see us wandering around, I feel like things could go wrong! And we don't know what'll happen if we spend a long time on this, so maybe it's best to just get it over with!!!"

I desperately tried to convince the two.

We knew this was definitely a dangerous item. If it went public that it was stolen, it could put things in place to start a huge war. We needed help from someone involved in the Church to hide what we were doing and reduce the fallout.

"Wait... I think Cardinal Wardell said something before about the Sophia Trading Company. But, if that's the case...you know, I should report this just to be safe," said Lisl with a hand on her chin as she muttered to herself in thought.

"Lisl-san?"

"I don't exactly want to invite in some messengers from merchants, but...I'm going to check just in case. Come with me to the temple. If His Eminence says he'll see you, then I'll let you through," said Lisl with disgust.

I could see scorn in her face. I never thought we would be greeted with open arms, but this... I had wanted to avoid wandering around showing the letter to any person who seemed like they might be connected to the cardinal.

Well, it looked like we were over the first hurdle, anyway.

WE FOLLOWED Lisl to the temple, then waited for her to come back after checking with Cardinal Wardell.

“...What do you think, Kanata? Will we get to see the cardinal?” asked Pomera anxiously.

Honestly, I wasn't sure. Sophia said Cardinal Wardell was a fool perfectly fine with doing shady deals behind locked doors, so I had thought it would be easy enough to recover the relic of the Church of Jonas. But at least this Holy Knight seemed to think of the cardinal as an upright follower of the Church, so I was starting to doubt my assumption.

“Well...if it doesn't work, then we'll sneak below the temple,” I said.

“Wouldn't doing that after coming this far be the same as if we confessed we were the ones who did it?” asked Pomera.

“As long as they don't have any evidence, then even the worst-case scenario would be fine...”

It's not like I wanted to do that, but the situation was what it was. The fate of the world was in the balance. This was much better than the higher beings getting their hands on the Staff of the Saint.

Lisl came back from checking with the cardinal while we were talking.

“Hey, you there. His Eminence said to let you in. But don't you dare do anything rude,” she said to us.

The three of us looked at each other and let out a sigh of relief. It looked like we might get away without resorting to thievery.

We followed Lisl further into the temple.

Cardinal Wardell's room was a beautiful place. There were relief carvings of angels and dragons on the door and walls. A huge stained-glass window

depicted a magic user holding a large staff with a crowd of people around him. That must be Saint Jonas and his disciples.

There was a man wearing a solemn robe with his back to us in the middle of the room, looking up at the stained glass.

“Your Eminence...I’ve brought them,” said Lisl, and the man slowly turned to face us.

“You’ve journeyed here as messengers of the Sophia Trading Company. Or, I suppose it would be more accurate to say messengers of Sophia, the World’s Recordkeeper. Either way, I have been expecting you,” said the man.

He...was a sturdily built old man with a balding head. I could only guess he was over eighty years old.

“Um...*you* are Cardinal Wardell?” I asked.

“I am,” he replied quickly, his expression questioning why I was asking.

“N-no way! W-we were told Cardinal Wardell is...a long-haired, feeble, irresponsible, cowardly playboy!” cried Pomera in a fluster.

“Pomera-san, you can’t say that out loud! I mean, I get why you’re surprised, but...!” I said.

“You impudent...! Cardinal Wardell went out of his way to make time for you despite how busy he is right now, and you treat him like this! I’ll cut you all down!” said Lisl, her face beet red as she drew her sword.

“I-I’m very sorry! It’s just, we’re a bit confused!” I said, desperately trying to calm Lisl.

Cardinal Wardell was staring at Pomera with his mouth agape, but then he let out a deep sigh. “I see. It seems it’s true you’ve come on orders from Sophia herself. I had hoped this was some sort of joke.”

“Huh...?”

“The last time I met Lady Sophia was fifty years ago. At the time...yes, I did

dress rather flamboyantly and have fun around town... I was the troublemaker of the church, benefiting from the influence of my deceased father to go run wild. Considering who I was, it's no wonder I would be insulted like that. I can never truly atone for my past."

"Fifty years ago...?" I said, thinking back to what Sophia told us.

"He's a cowardly, greedy, philandering, corrupt member of the clergy. The only thing good about him is his face, birth, and judgment. So he should listen to reason. He's a long-haired pretty boy with a thing for gaudy decorations. You'll know him when you see him."

So, she met with him "not that long ago"...?

"Ah...right, based on Sophia's life span, that really wouldn't be that long ago," I said.

Sophia was over ten thousand years old. I heard she was the oldest of all the high elves...the oldest of everyone in

the Unseen Hand of the Gods even, by a lot. From her perspective, fifty years really wasn't that long ago.

During that time, it seemed Cardinal Wardell had experienced so much in his life that both his appearance and behavior had changed drastically. We were lucky he was even still alive. If things had been really bad, we could have found ourselves dealing with someone two generations removed.

I had been thinking that Sophia was the real ruler of this world, since her massive trading company had spread its roots throughout the world during her long life, but maybe I overestimated her. It was clear that in exchange for living so long, her ability to grasp the flow of time had faded.

I wish she'd actually do her job and record the world properly.

"That old elf really screwed this up," muttered Pomera quite bitterly.

“I SEE... She wants us to sell *that*. That is quite harsh of her. But if she is requesting it, then the world must require it,” said Cardinal Wardell bitterly as he read Sophia’s letter.

“Cardinal Wardell...what does it say?” asked Lisl, the Holy Knight.

“It would be best if you didn’t know.”

Obviously, when Cardinal Wardell said “*that*,” he meant the Staff of the Saint. It wasn’t the kind of thing he could carelessly mention to his subordinate. There’d be a huge problem if it got out that the Church sold it off.

The thing was, while this might have worked with a young Cardinal Wardell, I had a feeling it would be a bad idea to try and buy a holy relic off the current Cardinal. While he was going along with things at the moment, he didn’t exactly seem enthusiastic about the idea of negotiating.

He did seem to understand though that the Sophia Trading Company wasn’t something you made an enemy of lightly. The way he was acting also made me think he learned through his past interactions with them that the trading company was an agent of the higher beings.

“Is the Sophia Trading Company that dangerous to deal with? I know it’s famous and contains the world’s wealthiest merchants, but...why do we, the Church of Jonas, have to be careful not to upset some *merchants*?! I don’t accept this, Your Eminence!” cried Lisl.

Cardinal Wardell listened to what she said, and his eyes flicked in our direction as if evaluating us.

“I presume Lady Sophia is confident in your strength?” he asked me.

“You could say that, yeah.” I nodded. It was more accurate to say we were just borrowing Sophia’s name right now, but I thought it would be hard for Cardinal Wardell to completely understand the situation if I said that.

“I see... Well, to be honest, I would like to observe with my own eyes the strength of someone who has received Lady Sophia’s acknowledgment. I do

enjoy seeing the martial arts. Apologies, as you must be tired from your long journey, but would you be so kind as to indulge an old man?"

"Meaning...?"

"Lisl here is fairly skilled, even for a Holy Knight. I would like to see one of you compete with her. Would you mind?" Cardinal Wardell looked at Lisl.

"M-me? Fight these people? Your Eminence, this must be some joke! Why must I do something like that?!" cried Lisl.

"Are you not confident in your ability, Lisl?" he asked.

"I am a Holy Knight responsible for defending this holy city... I will not lose to some messenger of merchants. What I question is the necessity of this!"

I looked at Cardinal Wardell. Our eyes met, and he said, "What do you think, messenger of Lady Sophia? I will not force you, of course..."

He was clearly trying to test us. He was probably considering chasing us away with force if possible. That didn't mean he took the Sophia Trading Company lightly, just that the Staff of the Saint was not that easily parted with from the Church's perspective. The flip side of this challenge was probably that he would be willing to hand over the Staff of the Saint if he determined we weren't people he could handle on his own.

"I don't mind, Lisl-san," I said.

"You underestimate me. Watch what you say, you faithless servant of a merchant!" said Lisl, her eyes narrowed as she glared at me and touched the hilt of her sword. "Your Eminence! I may injure this messenger if I try too hard."

"That's fine. Lisl, give it your all, so you regret nothing," said Cardinal Wardell.

"Hm. I don't entirely understand what your intentions are, Your Eminence, but I will do as you say and give it everything I have. Don't hate me for what's about to happen, merchant's dog!"

Lisl drew her blade. I dashed past her side, drawing my own sword as I did, and pointed it toward her back.

“What?!” Lisl scowled then turned back to look at me a couple seconds later. Based on her movements and reaction time, I guessed her to be around level 70. I hated to say it, but this was never even a fight.

“Is this enough, Cardinal Wardell?” I asked.

“That is sufficient. Lisl, stand down.” There was a look of resignation on the cardinal’s face as he sighed.

“I-I’m not done!” cried Lisl as she spun around and swung her sword at me.

I cut through the blade of her sword and swept her legs out from under her at the same time, and the broken shard of her sword embedded itself into the floor in front of her face.

“Impossible... I’ve trained at the sword for so long for the Church...” she groaned absently from the ground.

“Incredible skill. And I am grateful for your forgiving her cowardly surprise attack,” said the cardinal emotionlessly.

“I don’t mind, as long as we can have what we came for,” I said. I didn’t have to go that far, but I did have to prove to Cardinal Wardell that I wasn’t someone he could handle with force. That was probably what he wanted to confirm as well.

“I will lead you there,” he said. *“As a devout follower of Jonacism, I cannot accept any compensation in exchange...but I do ask that you ask Lady Sophia to not use it for evil, if at all possible.”* He bowed to me.

“I will, I promise.”

“W-wait, Your Eminence! Are you caving to the merchants because of my lack of strength?! No, you can’t!” screamed Lisl as she stood, broken sword in hand.

“Lisl, I thought I told you to stand down. Don’t make me repeat myself a third time.”

“U-urgh...” Her sword fell from her hand, and she hung her head in

disappointment.

Cardinal Wardell's personality might be a complete one eighty from what I'd imagined, but the negotiations themselves seemed to be going fine. The only thing left was to destroy the Staff of the Saint.

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WE FOLLOWED Cardinal Wardell down a dark passage below the temple.

"The Staff of the Saint is held ahead," he said.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Cardinal Wardell. I was wondering what your connection with the Sophia Trading Company was, Sophia didn't tell us much."

"A long time ago, I received a similar request to this one, just it was direct from Lady Sophia herself. She said I must comply, as it was the higher beings' will... Ha ha ha, please don't ask what happened. It involved something at the heart of the Church of Jonas, though not to the same extent as this time," he said, his shoulders slumping.

"At the time," he continued, "I accepted the contract with Lady Sophia to satisfy my own greed, because I was selfish. There has not been a day since that I don't lament the foolishness of my younger self. Though...I never did have a choice to begin with. Fifty years passed as I trained and grew my experience... and still, just like then, I am buying peace at the price of the Church of Jonas's dignity. You need power to make people listen to your will, your ideas. Integrity will never make up for a lack of power."

Cardinal Wardell seemed sad.

I might have approached this without realizing how serious it was. While this was the least problematic route, we were still forcefully taking away the pride of the Church.

We just couldn't leave the Staff of the Saint in the protection of the Holy Knights, since we didn't even know how powerful it was. They wouldn't be able to protect it from the higher beings' influence that might come. Just like Cardinal Wardell said, integrity wouldn't make up for their lack of power.

"It sounded like you know about the higher beings," I said. "I didn't think you'd have heard that much."

"...Yes, I know. I also know that the miracles and god that the Church of Jonas worships are nothing more than a play enacted by the higher beings. Do you find it humorous, messenger of the Sopia Trading Company, how I have been shown behind the curtain, yet I still squat timidly and maintain that exact illusion? But it is *because* of this twisted world that the people need absolute salvation! That is what I believe in!" Cardinal Wardell clenched his fists, his voice trembling.

"Actually, I think it's incredibly admirable."

There was nothing anyone could do about things even if they learned the world was made just to be a plaything for the obscene higher beings. There was no need to spread that cruel truth.

"I just didn't think you would have changed so much, you're like a different person," I added. I'd heard he was a cowardly hedonist with no sense of responsibility, but the reality was the exact opposite.

"And he got bald too!" cried Philia.

"Ph-Philia, that's rude! I-I'm so sorry, Your Eminence!" said Pomera as she quickly covered Philia's mouth and bowed to the cardinal.

Yeah...his appearance might be the most drastic change, I thought. Sopia said he was a long-haired pretty boy. Can't believe he's actually a bald old man.

"I do appreciate...that you listened to the fleeting request of an old man earlier," he said. "My apologies, but I haven't yet asked your name. The little lady seems to be Philia, and the magic user is Pomera, but...may I ask your

name?” Cardinal Wardell was walking ahead of us, but he stopped.

“My name’s Kanata.”

“Kanata...? I see. I don’t dislike you, Kanata, but it is quite unfortunate that we had to meet under these circumstances.” He turned to face us, his deeply wrinkled face distorted with hostility.

“Cardinal Wardell...?”

Just then, I sensed someone approaching from above, from the ceiling.

I immediately moved backward, and a pair of people clad in black armor landed between us and the cardinal.

“Oh, come on now, you really saying this pathetic bunch are the Unseen Hand’s vanguard? I’m insulted just getting ready for them,” said one of them, a tall man.

“Above a certain point, powerful people don’t rely on their appearance,” cautioned the other, a short woman.

The man had a large, brutish sword and the woman had a slender rapier. Both of them wore cold expressions and their eyes glinted red, even in the dark.

“Cardinal Wardell...what’s this about?” I asked the cardinal, who stood behind the two in black armor.

“Gah ha ha ha! This means I’m not going to bend myself to the higher beings’ will! I spent my entire life nurturing these two, using any means necessary, whether that be forbidden magics or powerful elixirs. They are the Holy Knights of the dark meant to fight against the higher beings...they are the God Slayer Knights! I knew that long-eared dog of the higher beings would come back to meddle again!” Cardinal Wardell spread his arms and laughed maniacally.

“What?!”

His meek demeanor up until now was just an act. He pretended he was sucking up to the higher beings and led us here below the temple, with the goal of using these God Slayer Knights or whatever to defeat us.

And the Unseen Hand of the Gods wasn't even working for the higher beings now!

I'd decided it was too difficult to explain that part, so I hadn't mentioned it, and that was biting me now. He wasn't going to listen to me at this point if I tried to explain.

"Didn't I say earlier that you need power to make people listen to your will?! Fools! I have obtained that! You are sorely mistaken if you thought I would just hand over the Staff of the Saint! My Lord Jonas, watch over us! We will defeat the foul people who set the stage for this wicked play, and then we will bring true faith and salvation to this world! The first step toward that goal is testing whether or not my God Slayer Knights can fight against the Unseen Hand of the Gods!"

It looked like even him sending the Holy Knight Lisl against me wasn't just a last struggle made out of faith. He wanted to confirm first that I really had strength on level with the Unseen Hand.

"Sopia told me you had good judgment. It's a shame for you that even that has changed!" I said as I drew my sword and raised it toward the God Slayer Knights.

"Go, Ideo, Valeria! Show your strength to this conceited messenger of the higher beings! Let this be a warning to all who turn against humanity!" cried Cardinal Wardell, and the two in black armor turned their swords on me.

"I'm only here to beat the higher beings to the Staff of the Saint, though," I said.

"Now you start with pathetic lies?! I have known for a long time that the Unseen Hand of the Gods are the dogs of the higher beings! And the Staff of the Saint is the soul of our church, outsiders like you have no right to protect it!"

No good, he's not going to listen. Actually, even if he was going to listen, I really don't think he's going to hand over the Staff of the Saint.

“Let’s see if you can defend against this, you delicate-looking man!” said the man in black armor. Ideo was his name. He swung his absurdly large sword at me, and I blocked it with my own blade. “Oh? Ha ha ha! That’s expected! We’d be in some trouble if you couldn’t even stop that much! Now let’s have a contest of strength!” Ideo’s arms bulged and started turning black.

“What the...?”

“This is the demonic power the old man researched! We’ll see just how much you can handle!”

I glanced at Ideo’s face.

IDEO IRGAS

Race: Human

Lv: 335

HP: 1608/1608

MP: 1192/1306

That’s...a letdown.

He was about as strong as the Evil Priest Notts. He was a humanoid dragon, but Corpse Doll Alice was also a humanoid dragon and was still *twice* his level.

“You’ve got to be kidding me...” I muttered without thinking.

“Ha ha ha, are you scared, little Unseen Hand of the Gods?! You’re not too bad, but this must be your first time overwhelmed by sheer power, huh? Let’s kick it up a notch!” Ideo’s arms grew even larger. “Huh, still withstanding it? But this will—”

“I’m just standing here holding my sword. I’m not even pushing back,” I said.

“What?” Ideo scowled, and I put a little force behind my blade into a

horizontal slash. “Gaaargh!”

Ideo lost that contest of strength and went flying backward. He flipped in the air and barely managed to land right side up, with a knee to the ground.

“H-he defeated me? In strength?” Rivulets of sweat ran down his face.

“Really?” I said. “Did you seriously think you could fight against the higher beings at that level? You might have managed to get to the realm of humanoid dragon at least, but you’re not even a high-enough level to be able to handle one of the more powerful Demon Kings. Both of you together would have a hard time against Sophia herself, and she’s not even specialized in combat.”

“You little twerp! Don’t get cocky! B-both of you, attack together! He seems stronger than Ideo, so don’t rely on strength! Fight with skill and speed!” ordered Cardinal Wardell, his face paling.

“If speed is what you need, then I’m your woman...” said the lady in black armor, Valeria, as she rushed forward. “You force me to acknowledge you’re more powerful than I expected, but we God Slayer Knights were created to take down fiends of a higher level than ourselves!”

Valeria thrust her rapier toward the ceiling, and a magic circle appeared. “Spirit Magic Level 9: Nymph’s Mirror!”

Valeria’s form seemed to separate into three images, but then each one of her started moving independently. It looked like a spell that borrowed the power of the spirits to create additional bodies. The first went right, the second went left, and the third leapt above.

“See if you can handle—!”

I kicked the left and right copies of her, sending them flying. They rocketed back and transformed into water. I watched that, then dodged the rapier coming down from above, wielded by the real Valeria. Then I hit her in the gut with the pommel of my sword.

“Urgh!” She let out a dull cry and dropped her rapier.

I tossed her directly into Ideo who was coming right back at me. He moved aside to dodge her flying body...but as he did, I moved in and clocked him in the face with my fist, sending him flying.

“Gah!” There was a sickening crunch that left an indent in his face.

He skidded across the ground as he careened back, then smashed into the wall and came to a stop lying on his back, his body quivering.

“You both seemed sturdier than normal for your level, so I hit a bit harder than I would usually. Please don’t be upset,” I said, then I turned to face Cardinal Wardell. “This is really unfortunate. I honestly believed our talks were going well.”

“D-don’t move, dog to the higher beings!” When I turned to face the cardinal, I saw his face was as white as a sheet and he was holding Philia. “M-make a single move, and this girl dies! H-ha ha, do you scorn a man of the cloth who would act this way? I would do *anything* for the Church!”

A magic circle appeared in his hand, along with a fist-sized ball of fire.

“Cardinal Wardell...” I said.

“H-ha ha ha...haaaaa ha ha! You may be a servant of the higher beings, but it seems you still care about your companions! Get up, Ideo, Valeria! Kill him slowly while he can’t move!”

“Fwooo!” Philia blew out the ball of fire in Cardinal Wardell’s hand, the puff of air erasing it in the blink of an eye.

“Huh...?” When Cardinal Wardell looked down at his hand, Philia raised her arms. The force took the cardinal up with the motion and into the ceiling.

“Bah! Aaagh!”

He crashed twice, once into the ceiling, then back down to the ground.

“S-sorry, Mister... That was too strong...” said Philia as she ran over to him.

“You monster...” he groaned.

“Kanata...what should we do?” asked Pomera, her eyes void of emotion as she looked down at Cardinal Wardell.

“We don’t have any other choice. It’s not classy, but let’s make them listen through force,” I said with a sigh.

-9-

AFTER SHUTTING DOWN the God Slayer Knights, I made Ideo, Valeria, and Cardinal Wardell sit on the ground in a row.

“This is absurd... You were the fighters I spent my entire life preparing to fight against the higher beings. For you to be so easily defeated...” muttered Cardinal Wardell in a daze, his face pale.

“Cardinal Wardell...I’m really sorry, but they are nowhere near high-enough level,” I said. “You have no chance of taking the higher beings on at that level. Did you really think you could manage?”

“Th-there are five God Slayer Knights in total! They’re assigned to other locations and missions...they couldn’t return immediately! Gah, if they had all attacked at once, we might have had a chance!”

“No...you wouldn’t have. There’s a way bigger level gap than you think there is. Just give up already.”

If five level-300 people attacked at once, they might be able to take out Sophia or Ramiel, depending on how they fought, but that was only true for a five-on-one fight where they got a surprise attack. I didn’t know about Zero, but they probably would have had no chance against Nobunaga or Veranta. Besides, the Unseen Hand of the Gods wasn’t even working for the higher beings anymore.

“Like I said earlier, the Unseen Hand of the Gods is now standing against the higher beings,” I said. “I’m also standing against them. We have no idea what they’re going to come at us with. You should completely understand by now that Luperm isn’t capable of protecting the Staff of the Saint. Please...just give

up and hand over the staff.”

“H-hmph, like I can believe anything you say! You’re working for those cursed higher beings! Even if you were opposing them, why should I hand over Lord Jonas’s staff to the likes of you?!” shouted Cardinal Wardell.

“Gramps...I’m sorry, but there’s no way we can defend the Staff of the Saint,” said Ideo. “As pathetic as it is, there’s nothing we can do if they come at us in force. I completely get that now.”

“Your Eminence,” said Valeria, “if the Unseen Hand really is opposing the higher beings now, then I believe it would be more advantageous to believe this person and negotiate peaceably. We have to keep the Staff of the Saint from falling into the hands of someone who would stop at nothing.”

It looked like both Ideo and Valeria thought it would be a good idea to give us the Staff of the Saint. Either that, or they decided resistance would only make things worse.

All three of them did seem to accept that the God Slayer Knights weren’t going to be doing anything against the higher beings, but it was Ideo and Valeria who were reconsidering their position, possibly because they were the ones who fully experienced how hopeless the fight we just had was.

I looked at Cardinal Wardell. Ideo and Valeria followed suit to make uncomfortable eye contact with their superior.

The cardinal pounded the floor. “I...I want to protect the true faith of the Church of Jonas... I dedicated myself fully, my entire life! But it still...came to this!” His voice trembled and tears spilled from his eyes. “This...this means nothing has changed from that day fifty years ago... Nothing! And if that’s the case...then what have I been doing this entire time?!”

Cardinal Wardell curled up and started sobbing.

“W-well, I think it’s incredible you managed to raise five peoples’ levels into the 300s! A-and I’ll do something about the higher beings!” I said.

“Aaaah, waaah, waaaaah!”

...It took nearly half an hour for the cardinal to calm down.

He spent his life working for the sake of the world and yet still couldn't do anything. I couldn't really say he was weak-spirited once I considered how painful that regret must be, but I was starting to think I could imagine the worthless, playboy Cardinal Wardell in his younger days.

Once he stopped crying, we somehow got him to lead the way to the Staff of the Saint again.

“We actually moved it out from beneath the temple a long time ago. It's currently held in the palace where the head of the Church of Jonas, the pope, resides. We will have to head there, but not even I can enter the location where the Staff is held without the pope's approval.” The cardinal was babbling as we walked back along the corridor from under the temple.

“You never even planned on giving me the Staff of the Saint...” I said with a sigh. Now there were more people I had to convince. We were in a fight against time, why did we have to keep going from one person to another?

“Do you think we can convince the pope?” I asked.

“I will need some time. I doubt he will give it up immediate—” said Cardinal Wardell.

“We don't have the time to sit around waiting. Could you use your authority to retrieve it without anyone finding out?”

“I-I could not do something like that! And today is the day Lord Jonas departed the world. The pope will be making an appearance at the memorial. I'll have to ask you to wait until tomorrow!”

We couldn't really wait several days for an answer with how things were... But it was also hard to tell them to put a hold on the commemorative events so they could hurry up and get us the Staff. Though, considering what might just happen, that was probably the best option.

“...Okay, just give us a map of the palace. I’ll sneak in and take it. You just have to make sure it doesn’t turn into a big issue after the fact,” I said.

“Are you serious?!” cried the cardinal.

“I don’t like it either, but it’s the best option.”

“B-but, but...!” He pressed a hand to his head.

Just then, there was screaming from outside, and it wasn’t just the screaming of one or two people. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of people screaming.

“Wh-what’s happening?” said Cardinal Wardell in a panic.

“No way...have the higher beings already made a move on the palace?” I said.

We really should have hurried.

-10-

WHEN WE STEPPED out of the temple, we saw the people of Luperm running and screaming. It looked like they were fleeing from something. This wasn’t a minor threat.

“What now...” I mumbled.

“Hmm...it seems people are running from the direction of the palace,” said Cardinal Wardell.

Today was supposedly the day that Jonas died, and I heard it was customary for the people to gather in front of the palace to offer prayers in remembrance of his passing. It looked like the people had been attending those events.

“K-Kanata, look!” Cardinal Wardell pointed to the palace in the distance. “The top of the palace has been destroyed! Impossible...! How could an attack get by, there is always a God Slayer Knight stationed in the palace!”

It was the tallest building in Luperm, but the top of it had been blown away,

seemingly by some sort of magic attack.

This is bad. The Staff of the Saint was stored in the palace.

It was highly likely the Staff of the Saint—the whole reason we were going through this mess!—had already been stolen by an attacker. We could have made it in time, but we totally missed it because of Cardinal Wardell's scheming.

As I looked at the palace, I caught sight of a skinny man wearing a dark red robe. Part of his body was wrapped in chains. He had manacles on his hands... and those hands were holding a large golden staff decorated with gemstones.

He looked down over the panicked streets of Luperm in satisfaction.

"What's with that guy in the red robe? He doesn't look like someone with the Church..." I said.

"Did you say a red robe?! That was the garb worn by the person most hated by the Church of Jonas! How dare someone wear that and attack Luperm on *today* of all days!" cried the cardinal in rage.

"Is there something wrong with a red robe?"

"There very much is! The red robe was worn by Lord Jonas's first disciple and his *betrayor*! It's said that Reniement, the Backwards Man, wore a red robe two thousand years ago on this day when he killed Lord Jonas! I can only assume this person is mocking us!"

I didn't know much about the history and religion of this world, but apparently Saint Jonas lost his life to his disciple.

"Reniement was said to be incredibly selfish, violent, and a liar. He was originally a thief working in a village, and he was nearly killed because the people hated him, but Lord Jonas rescued him. He embarked on a journey with Lord Jonas to save people and mend the world. From an external perspective, it seemed he had defeated his inner evils, but his roots had never changed.

"Then he killed Lord Jonas, his teacher, who he supposedly loved more than

anything. Afterward, he disappeared. No one has ever been able to understand why he committed such an evil act. The name 'Renielement' has become synonymous with 'betrayal' in the Church of Jonas."

This Renielement character seemed quite hated in the Church. It was obvious that no reasonable person would intentionally dress like him and visit Luperm on the anniversary of Jonas's death.

"Is that him... Ah, I see him now! He has the Staff of the Saint! Is this another agent of the higher beings? One not with the Unseen Hand?!" asked Cardinal Wardell.

I focused my attention on the red-robed man and checked his status. If his level had more digits than normal, there was no doubt he was sent by the higher beings.

RENIEMENT LUKOIE

Race: Human

Lv: 2643

HP: 8457/8457

MP: 8387/8457

It seemed like it. His level was way higher than Ramiel's, and she was a member of the Unseen Hand. It was safe to assume this person was sent by the higher beings.

Just as Veranta thought, the higher beings had come after the Staff of the Saint. I was glad his level was a fair bit lower than mine, but there was still the problem that he already managed to get his hands on the Staff.

And...there was another thing that caught my attention.

"I just want to check something..." I said. "Was Renielement's full name

‘Renielement Lukoie’?”

“Hm? I thought you didn’t know anything about the Church of Jonas, but you knew that?” replied the cardinal.

“I didn’t *know*, but I just found out...”

It seemed that red-robed man was in fact Renielement himself, the person who killed Jonas two thousand years ago.

You wouldn’t find many people this high of a level, even if you went back several generations in history, but now we had one to deal with here.

“Wh-what do we do, Kanata?” asked Pomera as she tightly squeezed her staff.

“...Thankfully, if it’s just that one man, we should be able to manage, but the Staff is a problem. Sophia’s original idea for our mission was just some simple negotiations. We should assume the Staff of the Saint has just gotten way more dangerous now that it’s in the hands of someone evil.”

We did have the option of retreating for now and calling for backup. Everyone else was busy collecting the other pawns, but our plans would be ruined if we rushed into this fight and lost. We could greatly increase our fighting power if Veranta or Nobunaga joined us, and nothing would beat getting Lunaère in here, if we could.

“Oh, oh...please don’t flee, my poor, weak, lost children. My master, Lord Jonas, forgives all weakness,” said the man as he raised the staff. “I invite you to the city of rats and death, Death Magic Level 15: Hamelin!”

A massive magic circle appeared, and light filled the area. Hundreds of the people who were near the palace suddenly disappeared, black rats in their place.

“Wh-wh-what was that...what happened?!” muttered Cardinal Wardell in shock as he sank to his knees.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha! My master will even forgive my foolishness! Will he not?”

Is that not right, my Lord Jonas!” Reniement let out a creepy laugh and lovingly cradled the staff in his hands.

I glared at him as he stood in the palace. It didn’t look like we had the time for a careful retreat. If we ran now, Reniement would continue to wreak havoc on this area.

Actually, I didn’t think this would end with just Reniement. If the higher beings sent this man, it meant they were willing to allow serious damage to Locklore. If Naiarotop’s target really was me, then I couldn’t take the safe option and flee.

“A spell of that scale isn’t possible...” said Cardinal Wardell. “Just one casting, and... Th-this is the end for this city... N-no, for the entire world! Is this divine punishment because I turned against the higher beings?”

The cardinal remained frozen, sitting on the ground, his shoulders trembling and head cradled in his hands. The situation was what it was, so it made sense, but it seemed like his cowardice was still intact even after fifty years.

“...Looks like we can cut out having to persuade the Pope. I’m going to defeat that man and take the Staff of the Saint. You don’t mind, do you, Cardinal Wardell?” I said. I took a long stride toward the palace, drew my sword, and readied it. “Summoning Magic Level 18: Wolzottl.”

A magic circle appeared, along with Wolzottl, the huge beast with beautiful blue fur.

“Help me out, Wol,” I said.

“Awooooo!” Wolzottl lifted his head and howled to the sky.

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WE REACHED the crumbling upper floor of the palace where Reniement was standing in no time.

Wolzottl rushed toward the palace. When it looked like he was about to collide with the people running the other way, he leapt up from the ground to a short building, then bounded onto the roofs of the taller buildings.

“My, oh, my, you...” said Reniement, turning to face me as I approached from behind.

I pointed my sword at him and fired off the spell I had prepared. “Fire Magic Level 20: Apocalypse!”

A flaming dragon burst from the tip of my sword and destroyed the upper part of the palace, but in that moment, a magic circle appeared, centered on Reniement, and he vanished.

He teleported to the roof of another building. Wolzottl landed on the upper section of the palace, now in flames from my spell.

“My, oh, my, how terrifying! Quite dreadful really... Having a level twenty spell cast at me is a tiny bit more troublesome than I was expecting. It is my own failure of calculation to ignore that the higher beings’ management has been this careless.” Beneath the cowl of his red robe, the man’s mouth split it into a wide grin.

“Naiarotop sent you, then,” I said.

“You would be half-right. But also half-wrong.”

“Half-wrong...?” I asked, and Reniement clung to his staff and ran his long tongue over it.

“I made this happen! So that I may use my master’s spirit to bring the curtain down on Locklore! The higher beings did not orchestrate this, I did!”

“What are you saying...?”

“I made the Staff of the Saint in the first place! And I was captured by the higher beings, my soul stored away as punishment, never to rot away...but in the end, I would be able to return to Locklore when it was in true peril! I was certain of it! And when that happened...my master’s soul would obtain power

like that of a god from the faith in him. Now I could use it to end this comical puppet show!”

Renient’s eyes widened, and the words rushed out, his eyes bloodshot and spittle flying.

“And, for the first time, my master will not be a puppet for the higher beings but the true savior of the world! The prophecies and our faith will become real! It will not be a false salvation, like a sweet placating a child, but *true* salvation! Oh, my master, watch what will happen! I will accomplish this!”

“...I don’t really get what you’re saying, but it sounds like the higher beings are stuck and resurrected you, and you’re going to destroy the world with Jonas’s power? How is that salvation?” I asked.

Renient’s breathing grew ragged from agitation, and he bent over backward. “Because I believe it to be so! What more is needed? My long journey with my master, my training, none of it could alleviate the rage in my soul! Is my soul simply beyond salvation? No! No! The destruction I cause is to raise Lord Jonas into a *true* god, to where the higher beings can no longer reach him! When I encountered the higher beings, that wall blocking our faith, I had an epiphany! Everything was for this purpose! That is why I had to kill my master!”

“That is just not right...”

I’d seen a lot of humans that wouldn’t listen to reason on my journey through Locklore, but this was my first time meeting someone so absurd and beyond understanding. He kept going on about Jonas, but as far as I could tell, his actions weren’t what Jonas would have wanted. Renient just wanted to destroy the world.

“You think me strange?” said Renient. “Only stupid beasts and those as dumb as them never think about what they are and where they are going. All lost children contemplate existence to find meaning in their own nature and life...and that is how it should be! Are you different? Do you not try to find

some value in yourself and your life? Such a valueless way of living looks horribly sad to me!” Reniement narrowed his eyes and glared at me. “I had hoped to reunite with my master on a more appropriate stage under better stars, but...it appears I won’t be given the opportunity to choose that.”

A magic circle appeared around Reniement, and he cried, “Death Magic Level 17: Incarnation!”

Purple light spilled from the staff and coated the area around Reniement. It quickly took form, changing into

the upper half of a skeleton with long hair. It floated behind Reniement, like some sort of spirit guardian.

I felt an incredible force coming from the skeleton glowing with purple light. That was most likely Jonas’s spirit residing in the Staff of the Saint.

“Oh, Master! My dear master! It has been two thousand years...and for the entire time, I thought of nothing but how much I wished to see you again! There are no words for the miracle that brings us together again!” Reniement’s wide mouth split open as he cried to the spirit. Emotional tears spilled from his eyes. But then his expression instantly went back to the empty one from before.

“Now, then...I honestly couldn’t care less about you, but I can’t very well ignore the will of the higher beings, so I shall take care of you quickly.”

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“THIS ENEMY could be annoying...” I murmured as I stared at the spirit floating behind Reniement.

JONAS

Race: Skeleton God

Lv: 5500

MP: 21877/32000

In straight numbers, his level was higher than mine. It was the first time I'd been beaten in levels since leaving Cocytus. It was also my first time seeing something with only MP and no HP. Was it because he was a spirit?

"Come forth, souls of the damned! Death Magic Level 15: Gehenna!" cried Reniement as he raised his staff.

Dozens of skulls made of purple light shot from Jonas and came flying toward me. Wolzottl leapt from the roof and ran from the skulls of light, but they were faster. I used my sword to knock them aside as they came from behind us.

A skull crashed into a wall behind us and exploded. In the blink of an eye, the wall around the impact turned purple and crumbled. These skulls seemed to be magic projectiles that caused any matter they came in contact with to wither and crumble away. They were about as dangerous as they could get, seeing as he shot off loads in one go and they had tracking abilities.

Since Reniement was using Jonas's higher-level power to fire these off, I doubted I would get out unscathed if I was hit with one. I bet my sword would have lost to the skulls' curse when I knocked them aside if it wasn't the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh that I got from Lunaère.

"My, my, that didn't quite go as planned," said Reniement. "I see, yes, I see, my master! This man is the final obstruction for my faith! And if that is the case, I will use all my power, as I always have, to eliminate him!" Reniement raised his staff again, and a crazy number of skulls shot out from Jonas's spirit.

"They're never-ending! Wol, charge! Let's challenge him to a fight!" I said.

"Awooooo!" Wolzottl whipped his tails in an arc, knocking aside the skulls chasing after us, then rushed straight toward Reniement.

"Such a foolish lost child! You dare challenge Lord Jonas, now a god, to a head-on fight?!" Reniement raised his staff.

Light bled from Jonas's spirit and turned into skulls again. It looked like

Renient was planning to shoot the skull spell at me head on.

“You should have run, Renient! Gravity Bomb!”

A black light appeared around Renient. The death magic skulls that were starting to fly out all suddenly stopped.

“A-agh...what is this?! It cannot be!” There was panic in Renient’s expression.

The black light contracted. Jonas’s spirit as well as the death magic skulls were sucked in by the black light’s implosion as they were smashed into the center.

There was a boom, along with a shower of dust.

“Yeah, got him...” I said, but as the dust cleared, I saw Jonas had wrapped his arms around Renient, protecting him. Jonas’s skeleton was bent and broken from the space-time magic, with bones snapped here and there, but the damage was already healed by the time Jonas stepped back from Renient to stand behind him again.

“Cursed outsider! How dare you harm Lord Jonas!” A vein throbbed in Renient’s temple, and his right eyelid twitched with rage.

“He’s tough!” I said, but that was what you got with him being level 5,500. I didn’t expect the destructive abilities of Gravity Bomb to do nothing.

“Awooooo!”

He definitely took damage, and Wolzottl seemed to decide we needed to pile on more while we could. I readied my sword as Wolzottl raced straight toward Renient again.

“Take this!” I swung at Renient with the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh.

But Jonas blocked my blade with his arm. Now it was a competition of strength, but it was no good. I was clearly the weaker one.

Wolzottl quickly pulled back when I started to think I was going to get overpowered. He leapt from the roof and flew in a zigzag, dodging the magic

death skulls coming at us from behind.

“Thanks, Wol. That was close,” I said.

This enemy was a real pain. I couldn’t take him out with magic, and there was no opening in his defense for a physical attack. They were winning on real power.

Perhaps it was lucky, though, that Jonas wasn’t coming after me himself, maybe he couldn’t move that far from the caster who created him.

“Graaaaah!”

Just then, a dragon over sixty feet long appeared behind Reniement, and a huge fireball shot from its mouth toward him.

Jonas’s skeleton guarded against the sphere with his arms, the raging flames nothing to him.

The death skulls instantly slammed into the dragon. Its huge body turned purple, and it fled to the skies in a rush. While it did escape, the purple was eating away at its body, causing its left arm to dissolve off quickly.

“Drigvesha, the First Dragon...? Why is it here?!” asked Reniement, his eyes narrowing as he glared up at the dragon fleeing farther into the air.

Then a rainbow light enveloped the dragon, and the purple rotting portions of its body regenerated to its original form. It looked like Philia had used the Sand of Dreams to transform into a dragon.

“What in the...?” muttered Reniement in disgust.

“Spirit Magic Level 8: Laelaps’s Fang!”

Then a spell fired off from the top of the dragon’s head. A hound of lightning rushed forward straight toward Reniement. The lightning exploded, but Jonas took that too as if it were nothing.

“Kanata! We’ll fight too!” shouted Pomera from atop the dragon’s head. Looked like they came to help out when they saw me struggling in the fight.

“It seems there are two more buzzing insects,” said Reniement, his gaze sliding to settle on Pomera.

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PHILIA, IN DRAGON FORM, flew around above Reniement.

“We’ll distract him as much as we can!” called Pomera from where she was riding on the dragon’s head.

“Pomera-san, Philia-chan...thank you!”

Both Pomera and Philia had decent levels thanks to their training in the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm. Attacks from them weren’t so weak that the Jonas spirit could just ignore them. Philia was also tougher than normal for her level. I knew because I fought her once as Zolophilia. Just as she healed herself in an instant from the rotting of the death magic, she could recreate her body using the Sand of Dreams, essentially writing off damage done to her. This did drain her MP a similar amount, but it meant she wasn’t going to die as long as she had MP left.

I didn’t want to drag the two of them into a fight against an enemy with a level in the five thousands, but I couldn’t turn down the help either. I didn’t know what would happen to Lunaère or even all of Locklore if I lost here. I could not accept defeat now that I was fighting against the higher beings.

“Insects shouldn’t get full of themselves... Death Magic Level 16: Spear of Mammon!” cried Reniement as he raised his staff.

A giant golden spear launched toward the dragon up in the sky. She twisted her body to try and evade, but the spear dug deep into her shoulder. Rainbow light ran over the wound, but it didn’t heal. With the base of her wing torn, the dragon’s flight became unsteady, and she lost altitude.

“Philia-chan’s Sand of Dreams isn’t working?!” I said.

“This is a demonic spear that bores into the soul of the target, not their body, cursing them...” said Reniement. “I doubt it will be easily healed.”

I gulped.

With her wing not working properly, it would be better for Philia to give up on fighting an aerial battle.

Reniement simply had a lot of skill with magic, and the ability to adapt. Philia might be tough, but he would seek out her weaknesses as the fight dragged out, and that was dangerous.

If this turned into a battle of endurance, then Reniement was the winner. He had the highest-level person on his side in the form of Jonas, so I needed to come up with a way to get the Staff of the Saint from him.

But no matter how we attacked Reniement, Jonas protected him. And he had several fast, powerful methods of attack. I was not seeing a way in.

“Gravity Bomb!” I pointed my sword toward Reniement.

Shimmering darkness spread out around him. Firing attacks at him without thinking was just going to drain MP, but this was the most effective spell out of the ones I’d thrown at him. If I hit, then I could stop him moving for a couple of seconds. That should be plenty of time for Philia to get her footing again.

“Short Gate!”

Reniement and Jonas disappeared, then reappeared somewhere else. The Gravity Bomb did nothing.

“Supplementing the slowness of the primary explosion with gravity... I won’t be hit with that spell again,” said Reniement, grinning so wide I could see his gums.

“Dammit!”

It was a wasted spell. Reniement first appeared to be running around wildly, but he was cautious about the actions he took for the process leading to his goal. He also likely realized that he had the advantage in levels, but he didn’t

allow that to make him drop his guard. With each move, he responded in a way that took advantage of my weaknesses, and he definitely didn't overextend himself.

He might be laughing and lamenting—equally overboard in turn—but his actions were still calm and collected. How could I find a chink in the armor of someone like that?

I saw the dragon land on a roof and instantly transform into Philia. Blood was running from her shoulder. Pomera stood beside her. It seemed Philia really couldn't regenerate the wound in her shoulder caused by Reniement's Spear of Mammon.

"Ph-Philia! I'll heal you with—" started Pomera.

"It's okay, Pomera. Philia can still fight." Philia steadied her breathing, and rainbow light engulfed her body. The next moment, she turned into a tall, long-haired man holding a large staff that looked similar to the Staff of the Saint.

"What's this...?" I wondered. Who was she copying? I felt like I'd seen him before. Then I remembered I'd seen a similar looking face in engravings throughout Luperm. "Is that Jonas...?"

If Philia transformed into someone with a higher level than her, she also benefited, allowing her to adjust her level several times. She must have decided that without her wings, it was more beneficial to copy Jonas than to be a dragon.

"Death Magic Level 15: Gehenna!" cried Philia in Jonas form as she raised her staff. Countless skulls flew toward Reniement, and Jonas's skeletal arms knocked them aside.

While Philia did turn into a weaker version of the original, she could copy Jonas's spells. And it was a big help that she could use the tracking skulls of Gehenna. That should pen Reniement in a bit at least.

"Damned child! What is with that appearance?! You look exactly like my

master! How dare you sully Lord Jonas's form with your petty games! Die!" howled Reniement, his face bright red. He had clearly lost his cool, and his attention was now fixed completely on Philia.

He's open!

"Wol!"

"Woof!" Wolzottl responded immediately to my call and rushed toward Reniement's blind spot.

As he did, I readied my sword and formed a magic circle. This spell had a short range and took some time to cast, but Reniement was distracted. This spell should be able to hit Jonas with his master like that.

"...It seems you are up to no good. Perhaps you thought this piddly trick would throw me off?" said Reniement, his head twisting nearly backward to look at me.

Jonas's skeletal arms reached in my direction.

Damn, we were so close!

Then a beast made of lightning slammed into Jonas from behind. That was Pomera's spirit magic, Laelaps's Fang. The collision jolted Jonas's arms off target so they only grazed my head.

"Aaaaah?!" Reniement grimaced.

Between dealing with Philia's death magic, the emotional distress of seeing her in Jonas's form, and me approaching from behind, Reniement couldn't keep track of it all, which meant he didn't even notice Pomera's spirit magic spell.

"Space-time Magic Level 20: Karma Breaker!"

A great beam of white light erupted from the magic circle I'd formed and engulfed Reniement.

The space-time magic spell Karma Breaker blocked the flow of bad luck, removing powerful spells or curses affecting the target and damaging them with

a holy light.

“Karma Breaker?! A troublesome spell!” cried Reniement. “So...you were planning on releasing Lord Jonas’s soul from the Staff! But a spell from someone like you couldn’t possibly purify Lord Jonas now that—!”

A fissure ran through Jonas’s form, then his skull shattered into tiny pieces and his arms burst off. Tiny cracks appeared in the Staff of the Saint moments before it crumbled to sand.

“I-impossible... This can’t be! How? Why?!” Reniement fervently tried to clutch at the sand slipping through his fingers, but it was no good. The sand disappeared into the wind.

“Jonas probably could have withstood that if he really tried. But your master didn’t want that,” I said.

“Impossible...! My curse destroyed Lord Jonas’s essence! And that was two thousand years ago! All that should have been left was a puppet, a vessel to receive faith! Lord Jonas couldn’t possibly choose to accept the spell!”

A gust of wind blew, and the scattered light of Jonas’s spirit body gathered together, reforming. But this time it wasn’t a skeleton but Jonas as he was when he was flesh and blood.

“M-Master...?” Reniement took an unsteady step toward him.

“I had hoped to give you a normal happiness. But it seems that did not come to pass. I at least pray that you may rest in peace,” said an echoing voice that must have been from Jonas.

Despite Reniement’s curse, despite the two thousand years, Jonas’s essence wasn’t completely lost.

“My master! Why? Why would you stand in the way of my faith?!” Reniement tried to grab on to Jonas, but his hands passed through, and he tumbled clumsily to the ground.

It ended up being more difficult than I thought, but, in the end, we

successfully destroyed the Staff of the Saint.

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“GAH... AH...AH, AGH! Have the last two thousand years been for nothing?! Impossible! This can’t be!” Reniement painfully tried to remold the dust that had been the Staff of the Saint. I stood next to him and pointed my blade at his head.

“It’s over. If you’re willing to talk about the higher beings—”

“Bastard! You bastard, you bastard, you bastard! You sent away Lord Jonas... I hope your soul is cursed for all eternity!” cried Reniement as he tried to grab me, tears flooding from his eyes and his expression wild.

I pulled back and dodged, then swung my sword. The strike slashed through him at the waist, and the two halves of his body thudded to the ground.

Without the Staff of the Saint, Reniement was just level 2,000.

“Ah, ah, aaagh... For what did I suffer these past two thousand years...? Just one more step...aaah, and I would have seen this world devoured...” Reniement lifted his trembling arm toward the sky.

“You’re still alive?” I asked, and Reniement looked my way. “You said a lot of extreme things...but in the end, it wasn’t that you wanted to fulfill your faith. You just wanted to enjoy killing.”

“Ha...ha ha ha... All lost children seek reasons for what it is they need to live... Death and destruction, they are everything to me, and Lord Jonas was simply a reason to affirm that. That is all...” Reniement’s eyes opened wide, and his gash of a mouth curled up in a grin. “Outsider, can you hear it? The sound of rats scurrying away?”

I listened close to my surroundings and could hear the faint sound of small animals moving. I looked toward the piles of rubble from the collapsed buildings

and saw rats running about in fear and confusion.

“Those are the people who lost their human form because of my curse. Those who lost their original forms from the curse also lost their intelligence. All they should have is the vague feeling that they used to be something else, and that will stay with them as they continue their pointless lives.”

That was probably that first death magic spell Reniement used, Hamelin.

“I love that curse, I love it, I love it... I wanted to fill the entire world with that curse... Ah, but at least I can hear the sweet sound of them scurrying as I die. That is one small blessing for me. Curse Locklore! I only pray the other two will bring destruction upon the world!”

Reniement grinned demonically, his spasming arms stretched toward the heavens.

...He's an unpleasant man who won't stop resisting until the very last moment.

“White Magic Level 20: Gorgon's Tears.”

Just then, the entire city of Luperm was bathed in light.

I shaded my eyes with my hand against the glare, while looking for its source. On top of a high tower, I saw Lunaère.

“Lunaère-san? Why is she here?” I murmured.

She was recovering several other pawns, so I thought she would be far busier than we were... Besides, what was that spell she just cast?

Just as those questions were running through my mind, I heard a cheer rise from the area around me.

I thought everyone had evacuated this area a long time ago, but it was suddenly filled.

“Wh-what happened...? I'm not dead...?”

“I feel like I was a rat just now... B-but, I changed back...? I'm back!”

It sounded like all the people Reniement had turned into rats were back to

their original form. That spell Lunaère just cast must have broken the death magic curse.

“No! Why? Why?! M-my spell can’t be broken! Something must be wrong!” shrieked Reniement.

“It looks like nothing went well for you, Reniement,” I said as I raised my sword.

“I don’t accept this! I don’t accept it!” he screamed.

I brought my sword down and split Reniement’s head. After shaking the blood from my blade, I returned it to its sheath.

“Kanata!” cried Pomera as she and Philia ran over to me.

Philia was swinging her right arm around. “Look, look, Kanata! The light healed Philia!”

She hadn’t been able to regenerate the wound she got from the Spear of Mammon, but it was back to normal now. The irreversible curses were undone.

We took advantage of the chaos there to get away unnoticed and met up with Lunaère on an empty street.

“You came, Lunaère-san. Thank you,” I said.

“I checked how you were doing using Tiamat’s Eye and the situation looked bad...” said Lunaère, starting off sounding proud, but then her face paled and she covered her mouth. “...A-actually, I just had a bad feeling and came since I wasn’t busy. You already defeated the attacker by then... I was a bit late.”

“You weren’t busy...? Lunaère-san, didn’t Veranta push a lot of stuff on you? What about those other pawns?”

“I’m done with them.”

“What?”

Lunaère folded her arms a little smugly. “I defeated the Giant of Famine and

the World Beast, and then I destroyed the Dragon Orb and the Tome of Annihilation. I rushed through them so we could meet up again, since it would be bad if something happened to you.”

“Uh-huh...”

Talk about a speed run. And Veranta evaluated each of those four things as far more dangerous than the Staff of the Saint. Did that mean that we were done with all the things we could do to prepare for the fight against the higher beings?

Anyway, we needed to go back to Veranta and report, especially after the Reniement incident.

“I feel like...there’s no way I can compete against Lunaère...” said Pomera, and she let out a heavy sigh.

“Pomera, bend down! Philia will pat your head!”

“Thank you, Philia...”

Chapter 3:

Lucifer, the Fallen Angel

-1-

A SINGLE DEMON flew through the skies of Locklore, twenty feet tall with gray skin and huge wings sprouting from his back.

“Don’t wanna work for those jackasses, but...I haven’t been on Locklore for ten thousand years. Let’s tear it up!”

The demon looked down at the ground and smiled evilly.

Lucifer, just like Reniement, was one of the Eternal Convicts—criminals of the worst kind who had been sealed away in another dimension.

He was created at the birth of Locklore as a manager, making him one of the most ancient demons. But the higher beings had a problem with his selfish and cruel management, and they sealed him away from the world, claiming Locklore would be destroyed if they left things as they were.

Lucifer’s destination was obvious the moment he returned.

“Yep, gotta head *there*. Hope you don’t regret this, Naiarotop. You said I could do whatever I wanted, yeah? There’s no way you’re thinking I’m gonna play nice and listen to orders, not now. I gotta go check on how my dimwit replacement’s doing.”

Lucifer flew higher and looked into the distance.

Deep in a vast forest was the ruins of a crumbling, old temple. Lucifer grinned when he saw it, his fangs peeking out.

“There we are, there it is! That magic...no doubt, that’s Cocytus. This’s the only way to smash up the world! I’ll release the monsters of the abyss, and they’ll take care of the rest!”

Lucifer was headed toward Cocytus. Monsters of extremely high level were sealed deep below ground, never to be let out.

If the seal on this dungeon was broken, the entirety of Locklore would be flooded with high-level monsters. No one would be able to survive above ground unless they were level 1,000 or higher. Everywhere would become monster territory.

“Hm...?”

Lucifer looked down at the entrance to Cocytus from high in the sky to see black, shiny golems appear from the shadows of the ruins. The golems had oval masks covering their faces, and there wasn't just one or two of them. They were scattered all throughout the ruins. The golems turned their faces up toward Lucifer, apparently noticing him.

“Cocytus...is guarded by golems? They're lookin' at me. A-are...they really challenging me?”

This squad of black golems had been placed by Veranta. He suspected the higher beings might try to mess with Cocytus, so he used his gift skill Omnipotent Alchemy to prepare an army of guard golems.

The ground bulged up in several places around the ruins, and large spider-shaped golems burst out. There were quite a lot of those as well. All of them wore the same oval masks and had large magic crystals embedded in them below their chins.

One of the crystals below a spider golem's chin glowed and launched a mass of magic energy skyward. Lucifer batted it aside with his hand, but the other spider golems lobbed light at him as well. He flew higher to avoid the golems' attacks.

He clicked his tongue in annoyance and raised an arm. “Tsk... Each one of them's gotta be like level 1,000. How annoying...”

A black flame appeared above his hand, then grew and grew, as if it would

never stop. In the blink of an eye, it turned into a sphere of black flame over three hundred feet across.

“Eat this! Fire Magic Level 25: Stellar Bazooka!”

Lucifer flung his arm down, and the massive black flame hurdled toward the earth. The moment it touched the ruins at the entrance of Cocytus, it erupted into a colossal explosion. It swept away the surface for nearly a thousand feet around it, blasting trees clear so there wasn't a trace of them left.

The ruins on the surface of Cocytus were utterly demolished as well, a huge crater in their place with just a deep hole in the center. None of Veranta's golems remained.

“Ah ha ha ha ha! They seriously thought they could stop me with that?! Idiots!” Lucifer howled in laughter, then folded his wings and dove straight down into the huge hole. Once inside Cocytus, he spread his wings and flew low but fast, moving toward the deepest part of the dungeon.

All types of Cocytus monsters stood in his way, but none of them could stand against him. He didn't even stop for the monsters he encountered, instead just flinging them away with his wings or killing them with his claws as he passed.

“Was this place always this big? Was thinking of using this trip as a way to get back into the swing of things, but this is a serious pain in the ass.” A magic circle appeared around Lucifer. “Space-time Magic Level 20: Gate of the Abyss.”

Lucifer's body turned into a black shadow, and he plummeted downward. As a shadow, he passed straight through the floor of Cocytus, allowing him to drop down, down, down....

After not even half an hour passed, he was in the deepest part of the dungeon: floor one hundred.

One hundred floors belowground, there was an endless abyss and a crystal walkway heading straight across it. Lucifer landed on that crystal path, still a black shadow from his space-time spell.

That crystalized path extended toward a throne. There sat Satan, the large demon and ruler of Cocytus.

Satan saw the large shadow descend in front of him. He narrowed his four big eyes and stood from the throne.

“Who goes there? The higher beings have placed a special barrier on Cocytus. None other than the one who reigns over this domain may use teleportation or permeation...”

“Hey, hey, now...you forget me or something? Sounds like you’re talkin’ down to me. I mean, this place was *my* domain originally. You got pretty full of yourself, eh, Satan?”

The shadow turned back into Lucifer.

Satan’s eyes opened wide when he saw who it was. “L-Lucifer?! Impossible, the higher beings would never free you!”

“Naiarotop-chan’s pretty fed up. He said I could have my fun with Locklore, however I like.”

“Absurd... That would mean the higher beings have abandoned Locklore! That can’t be possible!”

“Hey now, it should’ve been obvious the second I got here. It’s not like I’d turn against our grand lords, the higher beings. Anyway, that means you’re done being in charge of Cocytus.” Lucifer gave a joking shrug. “You were like a busy little bee listening to what those higher beings told you to do, so they’ll probably give you a job in another world once I grind this one into the dust. Demons with some brains are always in demand. Okay, give me control of Cocytus already. You *know* what I *want*.”

“...” Satan remained silent, his eyes cast down to the void below.

He was also aware that Lucifer was sealed away in another dimension after abusing his authority and ravaging Locklore. The only way Lucifer could come back from that other dimension was if the higher beings wanted him here. If the

higher beings sent Lucifer back to Locklore, that meant they had abandoned the world. A world abandoned by the higher beings could only be destroyed.

“What’s going on? Hurry up. Don’t piss me off...I can just kill you and take it myself,” said Lucifer, glaring at Satan.

Satan waved his arms, still without saying anything, a staff decorated with skulls in his hands. That was the Black Staff of the Apocalypse, the symbol of the ruler of Cocytus. It had the power to make minute adjustments to the barrier the higher beings put in place to control the dungeon.

Someone who had the Black Staff of the Apocalypse could easily release the monsters of Cocytus out into the world. And if that happened, everywhere in the world would be turned into a literal hell.

“Huh...you’re still a dumbass I guess, just like ten thousand years ago. You saying you’re fine with me killing you and taking it? Stop acting all high and mighty and hand it—”

Satan pointed the Black Staff of the Apocalypse toward Lucifer. “My duty...is to command Cocytus and protect the land of Locklore!”

A large magic circle appeared, and a huge flaming dragon emerged from it. The crimson dragon rushed straight toward Lucifer.

“Idiot. The higher beings that gave you that duty,” said Lucifer in exasperation. He jumped and spread his wings, easily evading the red dragon Satan sent after him. He then flew past Satan to stand behind him.

Three of Satan’s six arms were spread in the air, and Lucifer lopped them off with a claw attack as he slipped by. He had already gotten the Black Staff of the Apocalypse.

“Gah... Aaaaaaaaagh!” Satan screamed, pressed his remaining arms over his wounds, and crouched to the ground.

“Someone like you’s not ever gonna be able to stand against me, yeah? You underestimated me,” said Lucifer as he pointed the Black Staff at Satan’s head.

“K-kill me, then!”

“Hmm... Well, you basically killed yourself when you attacked me. It’s boring to kill someone who’s already about to die.” Lucifer formed a magic circle. “I’ll make you a little froggie instead. Death Magic Level 10: Ranacurse.”

“What?! Ah, agh!”

A mysterious purple light enveloped Satan. He was originally over thirty feet tall, but you could see him shrinking until he turned into a black, squishy, four-eyed lump of flesh. Its stumpy arms and legs battered about like it was frightened.

“Eah! Eaaah!” It opened its mouth wide and let out a dumb croak, somewhere between a scream and a sob.

Lucifer tapped the ground with the butt of the staff. “Ha ha ha ha ha! You’re just as ugly even as a toad! I’m not gonna let anyone who stands against me get out with an easy death! If you really love Locklore that much, then you can have a box seat as I turn it into hell!”

Lucifer howled with laughter and sat majestically on the throne.

“I’m seriously looking forward to seeing what those weaklings on the surface’ll do when the monsters of Cocytus flood out! Bet you are too, Satan, am I right?”

-2-

AFTER MANAGING to defeat Reniement, we were successful in our original mission of destroying the Staff of the Saint. Lunaère had taken care of all her - assigned pawns.

It sounded like the higher beings had sent Reniement directly. Were we at a point where Naiarotop was coming at me without caring how it affected Locklore?

First things first: we needed to return to Veranta and report in on what happened, including what happened with Reniement.

“It’ll be tough to find him, though,” I said. “He’s out taking care of pawns too, isn’t he? Maybe we should wait in the Arm of the Gods?”

“We don’t have to worry about that,” said Lunaère, and she pulled a glittering gold crystal from her breast pocket.

“What’s that...?”

“This is Tiamat’s Eye. If you accumulate just a small amount of magic in it, you can view any time and place you wish. Sophia gave it to me.”

“The high elf merchant...? You couldn’t even find something like this in Cocytus. I don’t think she’d just hand that over easily. Was it, like...a symbol of her surrender?”

“I don’t know. She gave it to me before I even knew she was a member of the Unseen Hand. It was sheer coincidence that I met her. And it was even when I was very open about the fact that I stood against them. It was thanks to this item that I managed to find where the Unseen Hand was. Sophia was likely acting of her own will, not for the Unseen Hand.”

...Sophia, a member of the Unseen Hand of the Gods, gave Lunaère this item even though she was their enemy?

Something smelled fishy about this story.

Everyone in the Unseen Hand was an ageless monster. I hadn’t heard anything about Zero, so I didn’t know about them, but Veranta rebuilt his body using alchemy, Ramiel became detached from age due to the Dragon Vortex’s influence, and Nobunaga had the ageless blood of ogres flowing through his veins.

Sophia was basically one of the first of the high elves, who were already long lived. Apparently their life spans were something like half of eternity. She was by far the oldest member of the Unseen Hand, around ten thousand years old

from what I heard.

For that reason, I wouldn't be surprised if Sophia knew more of the secrets of Locklore than even Veranta did.

"Did she want us to defeat the Unseen Hand...?" I asked.

"I came to that possibility as well," said Lunaère. "I imagine Sophia is looking many moves ahead of us."

That was a good thing since she was on our side, but we should probably be cautious of her. I wouldn't be surprised if she was hiding her true thoughts while manipulating the situation with some end goal in mind.

"...You sure she just wasn't terrified of you and handed it over so she could run away?" said Noble.

"Sophia is the recordkeeper of the world—she's lived ten thousand years. I don't think you should take her lightly," said Lunaère. Noble's reasoning was clearly too simplistic for her tastes.

"I think it's a possibility..." muttered Noble with dissatisfaction.

"Anyway, we can talk about Sophia later," I said. "We have to rely on her for now. Lunaère-san, I was thinking how you came at just the right moment, which means you were watching over me using Tiamat's Eye, right?"

"Huh?! N-no, it's not like that. I'm not constantly watching you! I-I swear! I had a difficult fight for the first time in a long time, so I did not even have enough magic for that! And it uses a lot of magic, so I can't maintain it for very long! I don't even mind if Noble checks for me!" said Lunaère, rushing to plead her case.

"Uh, I didn't imply any of that... But, anyway, could you use that item to check on Veranta and the others?"

"O-of course, leave it to me," said Lunaère, and she poured magic into Tiamat's Eye. The scenes whirled blindingly fast. "There's no one in the Arm of the Gods. If that's the case, then maybe Cocytus, which Veranta was in charge

of guarding... Wait, what's this?" Her expression clouded over.

I peered into the crystal as well and saw a huge wall. There were loads of golems there as well as people that looked like adventurers and even the kingdom's military.

They were fighting monsters made of large stones. The monsters were nearly fifteen feet tall and had countless, disturbing eyes all over the surface of their bodies.

"Wh-where is this? And what are those monsters...?" I asked.

"...The coordinates are right. This is Cocytus, and I've seen these monsters there before. Look, there's a large hole inside the wall...that probably leads to Cocytus," said Lunaère, but it still wasn't ringing any bells. This place was completely different from the entrance to Cocytus that I knew.

There was of course this towering defensive wall that I'd never seen, but all the trees around the entrance had been uprooted and were totally gone. There was also supposed to be the old temple hiding the entrance to Cocytus. There wasn't any hint that it ever existed.

"So, the monsters of Cocytus are spilling out, and the adventurers from nearby cities are trying to stop them...?" I asked.

Though, if they were the only ones fighting, they would never be able to survive. There were tons of monsters in Cocytus above level 1,000, but most of the adventurers in that area were under level 100.

Veranta probably created that wall and the golems with his ability. I imagined Veranta's golems were making up the majority of the fighting force, stopping the flood of monsters, while the adventurers were supporting.

But even though they seemed to be managing at the moment, they were going to reach their limit eventually. We needed to head there, immediately.

"Let's go," I said.

"That does seem like a good idea." Lunaère nodded in agreement.

Satan was supposed to be keeping control over the monsters of Cocytus. How did this happen?

“Let’s ride Wol,” I suggested.

Lunaère probably flew faster than him, but it wasn’t like me, Pomera, and Philia could hang on to her as we traveled. It would be better if we all went together on Wolzottl.

“Summoning Magic Level 18: Wolzottl,” I said, and a magic circle appeared, then the nearly ten-foot-tall beast with beautiful blue fur.

“Awooooooooo!” Wolzottl’s gold eyes locked on to Lunaère, and his two tails swished back and forth.

“Ah, sorry, Lunaère-san! Wol tends to get overexcited when he meets new people and he jumps up and—!”

Wolzottl rushed toward Lunaère, then...stopped. Halting right in front of her, he plunked down on the ground. His tails drooped, and his body trembled slightly.



“Unn...unnn....” he whined.

“...This is my first time seeing Wol sacred,” said Pomera as she watched Wolzottl lie down. Philia also watched him, her large eyes blinking in surprise.

It seemed...Wolzottl instinctually sensed Lunaère was in charge. Or maybe it was because of the unholy impurity?

“...It seems it would be better if I flew alongside,” said Lunaère sadly.

-3-

WHEN WE ARRIVED AT COCYTUS...there were more monsters than when we checked in on the situation with Tiamat’s Eye while still in Luperm. The wall was broken, and fragments of golem littered the ground.

“Where’s Veranta...?” I asked, looking for him from Wolzottl’s back.

“There he is, Kanata! Over there!” Pomera pointed, and I caught sight of Veranta.

He was rushing about on top of the remains of the wall fighting a massive bird monster.

The bird monster was cloaked in armor of flames and firing balls of fire at Veranta. Veranta doggedly searched for openings to fire off the weapon he made using Omnipotent Alchemy, but it seemed to be quite the resilient monster, because it didn’t look like Veranta was doing much damage.

“That bird...it’s a phoenix,” said Lunaère. “They’re high level and they can recover like nothing ever happened even if you get them down to zero hit points. They’re quite dangerous. The easiest way to defeat them is to strike them with physical attacks to create an opening for a death magic spell that directly cuts off their life. This might be difficult for Veranta to handle on his own.”

Lunaère split off from where she had been flying beside Wolzottl and sped up,

heading toward Veranta.

“Kaaaaaaaaw!” The phoenix opened its beak wide and screeched to threaten Lunaère as she approached. She kept moving closer, showing no signs that she was intimidated, and formed a magic circle.

“Gravity Bomb.”

A shimmering blackness caught the phoenix, then imploded. It was crushed into a sphere, causing flames to explode out. The spell smashed its body, but it - immediately tried to resurrect itself back to its original form.

Lunaère quickly extended her hand toward the bird. “Death.”

Purple light spread out, centered on the phoenix.

“Kyaaah!” It gave one last squawk before its body turned to ash and crumbled.

Veranta’s shoulders slumped, and he let out a heavy sigh. Then he looked in my direction, where I was still on Wolzottl.

“Huff, Kanata, and the others... You saved me. My apologies, but, as you can see, I failed to defend Cocytus. A powerful demon attacked and blew away the entire entrance, along with my defenses. There was absolutely no way I could stand in a fight against him. All I could manage was secretly withdrawing to avoid getting caught in the blast,” said Veranta apologetically.

“A demon attacked...?” I asked.

Veranta might be able to fight someone if they were around level 4,000 or so. It’d be safer to assume this demon was at least level 5,000.

And I didn’t think a demon that powerful could avoid the attention of the Unseen Hand of the Gods entirely. Which led me to only one conclusion: this demon was another assassin sent by the higher beings, just like Reniement.

“Curse Locklore! I only pray the other two will bring destruction upon the world!”

That's what Reniement said when he saw his defeat looming. That meant there were probably three assassins in total the higher beings were going to send. This was number two.

"And so, now I am fighting off the monsters overflowing from Cocytus," said Veranta. "I needed help for now, so I had the Sopia Trading Company dispatch the mercenaries working for it, while also requesting all A-Rank adventurers or higher from nearby cities to provide support."

"Right...I think I'm up to speed now," I said. "But Cocytus is massive, and there are a huge amount of monsters in it. Your fighting force is already dwindling, and even though you got some reinforcements, that's going to tail off..."

"I have a request for the two of you, Kanata and Lunaère. It's likely the demon from earlier released the seal on Cocytus. I need you two to go after him and defeat him."

"Me and Lunaère-san?"

"Yes. This demon is a fairly high level. Only someone with significant levels will be able to even leave so much as a scratch on him. I'm not even certain that I can hold the line here, so I would also like Pomera and Zolophilia to remain. I should be able to secure the surface if I have Pomera's white magic and Zolophilia's area attacks."

It seemed a good idea, based on what I was hearing, to assume the demon that went into Cocytus was even a higher level than Jonas. Pomera's magic probably wouldn't even be able to cause superficial wounds. That meant it would be better for her to stay here on the surface and support defense rather than get dragged with us for no reason.

I glanced at Lunaère.

"Let's do this, Kanata," she said. "We've nearly completed cleaning up the dangerous pawns in this world. Our enemy will likely be a high level, but he is also one of the higher beings' secret weapons. Sending something this powerful at this stage means they are finally running out of things to throw at us."

“Okay. The two of us will take out this demon. Pomera-san, Philia-chan, you help with the monsters up here,” I said.

“O-okay! We’ll give it our all! Make sure you two are careful!” said Pomera.

“So, we’ve come this far...now back to Cocytus. Kanata, let’s go kick some ass!” said Noble, reaching out his tongue and getting pumped up.

“Noble, wouldn’t it be best for you to stay up here?” said Lunaère, her hand on her chin.

“What?! But I want to hang out with Kanata for a while!”

“But this enemy seems a far higher level than you, Noble, and you don’t have any useful long-distance spells. I think it’s simply too dangerous. You would be more helpful if you stayed on the surface and defeated monsters here.” Lunaère’s tone was calm as she shook her head and refused.

She didn’t look embarrassed in the least, meaning this was nothing more than Lunaère dismissing Noble from this mission. Noble seemed to sense that as well, since his tongue drooped in disappointment.

“T-take care of things up here, Noble,” I said. “It’ll probably take some time for us to chase down this demon. I’ll feel a lot better knowing you’re up here, since your level is in the three thousands.”

“...I know you’re just trying to make me feel better.”

-4-

LUNAÈRE AND I went inside Cocytus, with me riding Wolzottl as he ran and Lunaère flying beside us.

As you would expect considering she’d lived here for so long, Lunaère made the right choice at every fork in the road, leading us along the shortest route down, and down each level. She also destroyed any monsters in our way practically in no time at all.

Even so, we didn't catch up with this demon that supposedly went in Cocytus first. Three days had passed by the time Lunaère and I made it to the ninety-ninth floor.

"We're finally at the lowest point," I said. "I wonder how they're doing up top."

"The other members of the Unseen Hand of the Gods will have joined them after collecting the pawns they were sent after, they only needed time. They also have Pomera and Philia, as well as Noble. I'm sure they're doing fine," said Lunaère before turning her eyes forward. "...It's more important that we focus on our own opponent."

Ahead of us was the giant staircase that led down to the hundredth floor.

Unlike the rest of Cocytus leading up to it, the stairs were made of transparent crystal. Below the crystal you could see an endless void. The demon we were chasing was probably waiting across that abyss.

We descended the stairs and walked straight across the crystal pathway. Sitting in the throne there, holding the skull-decorated staff, was not the usual guardian of Cocytus, Satan.

The current resident was a giant of a man, over twenty feet tall—his skin was gray, twisted horns sprouted from his head, and huge wings spread from his back.

Chains hung from various parts of his body, and there was a huge shackle on each of his wrists. The biggest thing I noticed was that the chains were snapped here and there and didn't look like they would function as restraints at all.

He resembled Satan, but he was more humanlike in appearance, if far too thin for one.

The man grinned when he noticed us. "Good job making it here. Looks like we've got Kanata, traveler from another world, and Lunaère, the lich. I was starting to worry, and I was starting to think I was gonna end up crushing

Locklore without any resistance.”

“You...”

“I am Lucifer. Would it make sense to you if I said I was the person in charge here before that other idiot? I went a bit overboard doing whatever I wanted, and they shut me in another dimension, but the higher beings change their minds all the time, so now I’m back. Ha ha ha, you’ve really screwed things up, haven’t you!” said the demon man, Lucifer, as he let out an amused laugh. So, this really was the second assassin, following up after Reniement.

“If you’re after me, you could have just come attack me directly,” I said. “Cocytus can’t even be that much of a reinforcement for you. Why would you intentionally come all the way to Cocytus and—”

“The ever-so-great higher beings plan to end Locklore. Because of you, Kanata Kanbara. I was told to stir this world up just a tiny bit as one last hurrah. How terrible is that?” said Lucifer with what looked like an intentionally exaggerated shrug. “Eh, I hate those higher beings...but I took the deal ’cause I wanted to see Locklore get all torn apart. I don’t get why, but the more people build stuff up, the more I want to tear it down.”

Lucifer’s expression was hostile. It seemed painfully clear that he wasn’t the kind of person to listen to reason.

“Ah ha ha ha! No matter how you look at it, you Locklorians are just mere dolls for us to play with!” he said.

“Huh... It seems like the higher beings are short-staffed. First, they send Reniement, now someone like you,” I said.

“Oh, you already met that nutcase? And you already beat him...? Hah! He was all preachy earlier, but then he went and died that fast. *Humans*, am I right?” Lucifer slowly stood and tapped the floor with the butt of the staff. Then he smiled, a cruel smile that showed his fangs. “All right then, let’s get this show on the road! You’ll see how you’re nothing but dust to the great demon Lucifer!”

Lucifer spread his wings and leapt into the air.

LUCIFER

Race: Demon

Lv: 8241

HP: 38732/38732

MP: 33521/33788

I gripped the hilt of my sword tighter.

His arrogant attitude wasn't for nothing. His level was just way too high.

"Lunaère-san, please be careful. His level is over 8,000," I said, feeling an intense overwhelming pressure from Lucifer.

"I'm surprised. It really has been a long time since I fought someone a higher level than me," said Lunaère. "I'm only a little over level 7,000. But I don't intend to let that make me fall behind this vulgar person."

I wasn't even level 5,000...and Lunaère was 7,000 and a bit. It wasn't massively reassuring considering Lucifer was over level 8,000, but we had a good chance of winning.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! You are my toys! I hope you don't break too easily! You'll disappoint the higher beings watching!" said Lucifer as he readied his black staff. "I'll wipe you out! Fire Magic Level 25: Stellar Bazooka!"

Black flames appeared above Lucifer's staff, then they expanded, growing endlessly.

"No way..." I said, the words just coming out as I looked up at the ceiling. The black flames at the tip of the staff had turned into a gigantic ball of fire over three hundred feet across in the blink of an eye.

“Hah, you’ll die if you don’t dodge this! Ha ha ha ha ha!” Lucifer swung the staff down in our direction and the huge, black sphere hurtled down toward us.

“Awooooo!”

“Wol!”

Wolzottl jumped into the air a moment before I even called to him. Lunaère flew the opposite direction from us in order to avoid the flaming sphere.

The gigantic Stellar Bazooka crashed into the crystal pathway, and an incredible gale tore apart the crystal path.

“That’s too powerful!” I said as the blast rocked Wolzottl’s balance as he flew.

“Grrrrr...”

Lucifer flew down right in front of me. I was ready for this, but he was still terrifyingly fast.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! I’m good at aerial battles too! Time to *die*!” He slashed at me and Wolzottl with his claws.

“Gah!”

I just barely managed to knock the strike aside with my blade, but Wolzottl was sent tumbling and lost his balance.

I clung onto the fur on Wolzottl’s back with all I had using the hand not holding my sword. I would fall into the abyss below Cocytus if I got thrown off now. Wolzottl moved, trying to put distance between us and Lucifer for a moment, but Lucifer pursued, closing any distance.

“How was that? How ’bout this? And this?!”

Lucifer slashed with his left hand. I scrambled to parry it, but Lucifer immediately followed up with another strike with his right hand.

While I was doing everything I could to block the attacks, I eventually lost my balance entirely, and the claw I meant to defend against tore deep into my chest, flinging me from Wolzottl’s back at the same time.

“Agh!!!”

Things are going dark...

If Lucifer had really been trying to kill me with that series of attacks, he could have. He was just playing with me.

“Kanata!” Lunaère screamed, and it was thanks to that cry that I managed to pull myself back to consciousness.

“Awoooooo!”

I reached toward that howl and was able to touch Wolzottl. It seemed that he came over right next to me. I dragged myself back onto his back.

“Hah, you’re not half-bad,” said Lucifer. “There’s not too many people out there as strong as you. But I’m still stronger! I’ll show you that in the end, no matter how far you go, you’re still just a puppet on a stage!”

Lucifer rushed toward me. I hadn’t fully gotten myself back on balance yet, but I still had to stop the powerful claw strike from Lucifer with my sword.

I can’t find a way to get a counterattack in!

Lucifer’s flurry of blows was powerful, fast, and sly. He was trying to throw me off balance and play with me.

He also kept driving me back away from Lunaère, meaning she couldn’t really step in to help. He was skillfully avoiding a two-on-one style fight.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! Taking on a pair of lovers...I hit the jackpot! Listen up, Lunaère! I’m gonna toy with you once I pummel your man to death and you’re all raging with revenge!”

Lucifer stretched out his purply-red tongue and let out a crude laugh.

The moment he did, a vein throbbed in Lunaère’s temple and the glare from her mismatched eyes bore into Lucifer. She sped up. Before she’d been unable to catch up with us, but now her kick landed squarely into Lucifer’s stomach.

“Oof!” He went flying backward. “Ha ha ha! What?! You’re actually kind of

fast when you're really trying! You're a simple girl, aren't ya? You fall apart the moment your man gets—"

"Gravity Bomb."

Lunaère's follow-up spell went off before Lucifer fully righted himself again.

The second the black light expanded, it caught onto Lucifer and rapidly imploded. Lucifer tried to scurry away, but the gravity had a hold of him and wouldn't let him escape.

"Tsk, that's an annoying spell! God...*dammit!*" Lucifer used pure force to escape the black light, but he wasn't able to avoid it entirely. His left arm bent awkwardly and shattered into pieces.

"Gaaaaaaah!" he shrieked.

"Kanata, is your chest all right?" asked Lunaère as she flew over to me.

A magic circle appeared and the wound on my chest closed in mere moments—Lunaère's spell, Retrograde. It reversed the flow of time, completely recovering any wound or defect.

I smiled slightly. There was something nostalgic about that spell to me.

"Kanata...?" asked Lunaère.

"Uh, sorry. I was just thinking how we haven't fought together since I left Cocytus. I know it's not the situation for it, but it brings back memories and... sort of makes me happy." And it'd been a long time since Lunaère cast Retrograde on me. "I can't just be holding you back. This isn't the same as back then, I graduated from your training. I didn't get off to a great start in this fight, but let me stand beside you now. It's been a long time since I've fought someone at a higher level than me, but it's not the first time."

Lunaère gave me a blank stare of amazement for a moment, but it quickly turned into a smile. "Yes, please do. This enemy looks to be just a little beyond me, if I'm on my own. And you are my approved disciple. I'm counting on you."

"Don't get cocky..." said Lucifer. "A wound like this isn't anything to me." He

pressed hard on his left elbow with his right arm.

His left arm spasmed and jerked, then the forearm that had just been torn to pieces regrew, returning to normal in a matter of moments.

“You might be undead, but you’re still just a fake human! I’m way tougher than the two of you! An arm or two ain’t nothin’! I let my guard down a tiny bit, but now play time’s over! I’m seriously gonna destroy you!”

He came at us. Lunaère and I exchanged a quick look, and then we flew to opposite sides to flank him.

“You think you’re tricky!” he cried.

I swung my sword at his claws from the left side. I was only dealing with one of his hands, but I still had to put everything I had into my attacks just to handle it, considering my level. Even so, if I could keep even just one of his hands tied up, then Lunaère should be able to land a decisive blow.

She went into hand-to-hand combat with him. Though he boasted the much larger size, she kept moving to slip into his blind spots where she would crack him in the hips and back with sharp kicks. He couldn’t fully handle her movements while I was distracting him.

“Tsk, dumbasses! Don’t think this improv coordination’s going to work well for you forever!” shouted Lucifer as he lashed out with both claws in a twirling strike. When he did, I slipped from right to left, avoiding the claws. Lunaère moved the opposite, from left to right, and she evaded as well, leaving Lucifer defenseless as both his arms stretched out and struck nothing but air.

“Huh...?”

For a brief moment, Lucifer lost sight of both me and Lunaère. I used that moment to slash his abdomen, and Lunaère smashed his head with a kick at the same time.

“Ack?! You pieces of trash! How dare you?! I’m higher-level! How can these garbage enemies do this?!”

Our attacks seemed to do a lot of damage. Lucifer did look like he was in pain as he cradled his head and retreated from us.

Unfortunately for him, our coordination wasn't just improvisation. I couldn't fight to my fullest earlier because I'd felt so overwhelmed by him, but once I really thought about it, I realized that Lunaère and I had fought demons more powerful than me more than just once or twice. That's what we'd done every time in the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm.

We were completely in control of the pace of this fight.

I formed a magic circle and fired off a spell at Lucifer.

"Fire Magic Level 20: Apocalypse!"

A red dragon raced through the air and tried to clamp its jaws onto Lucifer. Lunaère used space-time magic to teleport to my side and avoid the spell.

"...Hate relying on the damn staff, but guess I got no choice. You small fry are just a little bit annoying," said Lucifer as he raised his staff. Just as a magic circle appeared in front of him, my Apocalypse dragon vanished. "That's enough for now. None of your little tricks or cooperation are gonna work on me anymore, not one bit. I'm gonna crush you with the sheer difference between our abilities."

...That's the same staff ability that Satan used.

BLACK STAFF OF THE APOCALYPSE

VALUE CLASS: *Godly*

A staff that confirms the wielder as the rightful King of Cocytus and provides the necessary power to rule the dungeon. All monsters sealed in Cocytus will submit to the wielder's sovereignty.

The staff assists with the casting of godly fire spells above level 20 and creates an anti-magic barrier around the wielder.

The staff's size scales to the size of the user.

It created an anti-magic barrier... That was the power of the Black Staff of the Apocalypse, the symbol of the ruler of Cocytus which Lucifer must have stolen from Satan.

When Satan used that barrier, he didn't have enough magic for it to fully cancel out my spell, and that left me with the impression that the power wasn't all that great, but there was just too large a difference in power between users now.

In terms of levels, Lucifer was higher than both me and Lunaère. We would definitely lose out in a fight of pure power if we tried to hit him with the amount of magic we had and the spells we could output with it. Lucifer having a barrier that canceled out all spells without question was an incredibly difficult thing to deal with.

"Can't believe pathetic humans made me use the Black Staff. That seriously pisses me off," said Lucifer.

It was actually absurd that he could completely nullify all lower-level spells. Our only option was to use the fact that we outnumbered him to overwhelm him, but since we couldn't use magic, Lucifer could just fire wicked spells at us while we couldn't do anything back.

And when I'd thought that far, a smile naturally formed on my face.

"Kanata...?" asked Lunaère, looking at me with confusion.

"What's so funny, you otherworld ass?!" shouted Lucifer as he glared at me.

"Well...when I really thought about it, I realized we've fought against demons with anti-magic abilities before, in the Cursed Mirror," I said. And sure, Lucifer was a higher level than the demons in the Cursed Mirror...and he was intelligent—but I still had Lunaère by my side. I had no intentions of losing to a guy like this.

“I am the oldest, greatest demon, created directly by the higher beings to rule over Locklore... I am *nothing* like those pathetic things! Don’t you dare lump me in with those filthy bugs who just happened to come into existence from the gaps in space-time because of the higher beings’ screw-ups!”

Lucifer launched toward me. Wolzottl ran to the right, while Lunaère moved into pin Lucifer between us as he chased me.

“I didn’t get the impression...that the black staff’s anti-magic barrier reacted all that fast,” said Lunaère. “Kanata, let’s destroy it with numbers.”

I nodded and stopped Wolzottl from fleeing. He did a sharp turn in midair so we faced Lucifer again.

I split my thoughts into two, increasing the number of magic circles I could make at the same time using the Twin Minds Method Lunaère taught me. I steadied my breathing and formed two magic circles.

“Fire Magic Level 14: Inferno Sphere!” I shouted and raised my sword. Two deep crimson balls of fire more than thirty feet in diameter appeared in the air.

“Lightning Magic Level 17: Indradhanush.”

Lunaère was on the other side of Lucifer, where she closed her eyes and lined up three magic circles. It seemed for her it wasn’t just the Twin Minds Method, it was the Triplet Minds Method.

Several lightning bolts shot out of each of the magic circles Lunaère made, filling the vicinity with a bright-white glow. I launched my two balls of fire at the same time, then immediately started preparing my next magic circles once those spells were done.

Fire and lightning crashed together again and again with Lucifer in the middle.

I saw Lucifer appear, fleeing from the explosion. “You seriously just pummeling me with spell after spell?!”

Patches of his skin were burnt and peeling. Just like Lunaère noticed, the Black Staff’s anti-magic barrier couldn’t keep up.

“You call yourself the ruler of Locklore, but you really aren’t all that much,” said Lunaère. “I imagine you’ve mostly only used your superior strength to defeat weaker enemies. You’ve never really fought someone as strong as you. You’re good at overwhelming with your stats if you have control...but the moment you’re fighting a defensive battle, it all falls apart.”

“You worm! You’ll regret that!” said Lucifer, baring his teeth. “Space-time Magic Level 25: Mirrored Wormhole!”

A gigantic magic circle appeared centered on Lucifer. The next moment, my surroundings warped, space twisting in places and black hole-like things appearing.

“What the...?” I gasped. Everything around me looked weird. The scale of this spell was just way too big.

“This spell warps space in the area, forming holes that only the user can pass through!” cried Lunaère. “Kanata, be careful! While space is warped, he can move freely where he wants within range!”

“Hah, so you know about it?”

“But just knowing about it...”

“...Doesn’t mean you can handle this spell’s terrifying abilities!” Lucifer’s location changed with each moment. Unlike simple teleportation space-time magic, there was no casting time for shifting location once the spell was active.

This spell wasn’t just very hard to deal with—it was impossible.

“Kanata, don’t stop firing multi-attacks! Even if we don’t know where he’ll appear, we should be able to limit his movements if we keep hitting him with magic!” said Lunaère.

She kept up her magic circles for her lightning spell and fired them desperately at Lucifer.

“O-okay!” I formed two magic circles using the Twin Minds Method, then I sensed Lucifer behind me.

“I see you, dumbass. Since you’re using the Twin Minds Method, you don’t pay as much attention to other stuff!” he said.

By the time I spun around, Lucifer’s claws were already in front of my face. His teleportation was just too fast. While I was reeling back, a magic circle appeared between me and Lucifer, and Lunaère flew out.

“What?!” cried Lucifer.

“I knew you’d try to ambush Kanata. You don’t have the *guts* to fight me when it’s two against one. The moment you used this huge-scale spell, it was obvious you’d be going after Kanata,” said Lunaère.

She’d secretly hid the magic formulas for a teleportation spell in among the three magic circles she’d made. Perhaps she had us stick to the same strategy because she guessed Lucifer would try to get behind me.

“I will not let you lay a single finger on Kanata again,” she said.

“Damn you!”

After being a moment too slow, Lucifer swung his claws at Lunaère. She moved far to the side to dodge, then slammed Lucifer with the lightning magic spells she’d prepared. I hit him at the same time with two shots of fire magic.

Lucifer held his staff in front of him and formed a magic circle, defending against our barrage of spells with the Black Staff’s anti-magic barrier.

“Didn’t I tell you it’s pointless?! Just give up already!” he shouted.

“That ability...isn’t something you should use at such close range,” said Lunaère. She somersaulted backward in the air, and her foot smashed into the hand Lucifer used to hold the Black Staff. It flew high into the air.

“Agh!” Lucifer scowled.

Lunaère used the rebound of her kick to move back next to me. “Kanata...”

I could see in her eyes that she was sending me a signal to do the same as she did, and I instinctively knew what spell I should use. The two of us made our

magic circles at the same time.

“Gravity Bomb!”

“Gravity Bomb!”

We were completely in sync. Black light appeared to the right and left of Lucifer.

“Dammit, gravity magic!” Lucifer’s face paled.

“Gravity can interact with extra dimensions as well... There’s no running away into the warped space-time of your Mirrored Wormhole. You seem capable of forcing your way out when there’s only one of them...but I’m sure even you can’t escape if you’re trapped between two,” explained Lunaère.

“This is a load of crap! I’m the most powerful person in Locklore! I don’t accept this! I don’t! These pathetic nobodies can’t beat—!”

The two castings of Gravity Bomb grabbed Lucifer and imploded. His body was torn apart, pulled both left and right, the extreme gravity wells compressing him into separate pieces before exploding.



“Gaaaaaah!”

Lucifer’s body scattered into the abyss in fragments, twisted arms and legs, chunks of flesh, and his head falling into the nothingness of Cocytus.

“Yes, not even he can survive...” I started to say, but one of Lucifer’s huge arms was coming straight toward me. Even though his four limbs had all been torn off when he was caught between the Gravity Bombs, this arm still acted as if it had consciousness.

“Crap!” I cried as Lunaère moved between me and the arm using a teleportation spell. She grabbed his arm in her hands and used a fire magic spell to turn it to ash before letting it drift down into the abyss below.

“Thank you...Lunaère-san,” I said with a sigh of relief.

I looked down at all the pieces of Lucifer falling into the void. His head stared up at us, hatred in his eyes as it fell into the darkness.

“I am the greatest, most magnificent demon! I’m not like you puppets! This can’t be happening! This is bullshiiiiit!”

His head disappeared into the darkness, screaming curses at us the entire time.

“Awooooo!” Wolzottl suddenly climbed in the air, then snatched the Black Staff of the Apocalypse in his mouth as it fell back down from Lunaère’s earlier kick.

“Is Lucifer really dead...?” I murmured, staring into the depths where his head fell.

“I’m not sure. That was my first time against an enemy at that level. Demons are resilient to begin with. As surprising as it is, I think he may still be alive. Though, I never expected he’d be able to speak even after being turned into a decapitated head. We should have caught him before we lost sight and made sure to finish him off.” Lunaère’s eyes turned down to the abyss below.

“*Seriously?!* ” I cried.

“Though, even he shouldn’t be able to do anything as just a head. He’ll probably just fall through this nothingness forever.”

“Huh...” I felt a little relieved. But despite everything, I also felt a little bad for him. “You know...he said he’s not like us puppets, but from the higher beings’ perspective, there probably isn’t that big a difference between humans, dragons, and ancient demons.”

I sighed.

Lucifer was basically a giant ball of arrogance in the form of a demon, which meant he couldn’t accept the fact that, in the end, he was still nothing more than one of the higher beings’ pawns. That’s why he made himself the most powerful being in Locklore and why he wanted to be the one to drop the final curtain.

That would prove he wasn’t like the other residents of the world, he wasn’t just a puppet.

There was talk that Reniement originally had a violent streak in him, but the faith he gained from his journey of training with Jonas allowed him to hold that back. The thing that made him go crazy was the truth he learned that everything he believed in was nothing more than a script written by the higher beings.

Reniement himself acknowledged the fact that he simply wanted a philosophy that affirmed his violent nature, but even with that being true, if he hadn’t learned the truth of Locklore, he probably never would have killed his master, Jonas.

In that way, both Reniement and Lucifer were just two more victims of the higher beings.

Both of them were people who planned to kill lots of people, and people who had actually caused similar incidents in the past that ended with them thrown in isolation. There wasn’t a single part of me that was going to forgive them for

what they did.

But that didn't also mean there wasn't a single part of me that understood.

And it wasn't like there was nothing in common between my situation and theirs. Those two went on rampages to build their own identity in a world controlled by the higher beings, and Lunaère and I were dragging the entire world of Locklore into a war against the higher beings in order to protect ourselves. There probably wasn't that big a difference between us from the perspectives of the people of Locklore who just wanted to live peaceful lives.

"Ah... Ah..."

Just then, I heard some sort of...cry?

"Hm...?" I turned to look in the direction of the sound and saw a fragment of the former crystal pathway floating in the air. On it was some sort of gross lump of flesh.

I really couldn't think of any other way to describe it. It had four eyes, short stubby forelegs, and short stubby hindlegs. But that odd, four-eyed fleshy thing seemed to be trying to tell us something. It looked up at me with desperation.

"That's a very odd toad... Why is it here of all places?" asked Lunaère with her head cocked in confusion.

Then it hit me, a feeling that I'd seen that toad's face before. "Wait...are you Satan?"

I saw Reniement turn humans into rats in the holy city of Luperm. If you could turn humans into rats, then it wouldn't be that weird if you could turn demons into toads. And Lucifer seemed like the kind of guy to do that sort of thing.

Lunaère quickly flew over and scooped up the four-eyed toad in her hands.

"It appears you've been put under some sort of curse. Thanks to Lucifer, you went flying when he destroyed the place you were standing on. Let's go back to the ninety-ninth floor first, then we can try undoing this curse."

WE RETURNED to the ninety-ninth floor. Once there, Lunaère used white magic to break the curse on the strange lump of flesh. In just moments, the toad turned back into a huge thirty-foot-tall demon—Satan’s original form.

“Thank you so much...” he said. “I was certain that was the end of me. Lady Lunaère, Master Kanata, there are no words to express my gratitude!”

The large, six-armed demon bobbed his head, bowing over and over to the two of us.

“Kanata...do you know this person?” asked Lunaère in confusion.

“Ah... I-I am the guardian of Cocytus!” said Satan. “D-don’t you remember me, Lady Lunaère?”

“I don’t think we’ve met,” said Lunaère uncomfortably.

“But we have! You don’t remember?! And we’ve even met twice! A whole two times!” said Satan, desperately trying to convince her.

Thinking about it...when I graduated from being Lunaère’s student, she didn’t tell me about Satan guarding the one-hundredth floor. Maybe she’d totally forgotten about him by then.

“One of the times we met was when you were leaving Cocytus recently!” said Satan.

“...Now that you mention it, I vaguely remember seeing a monster blocking my path on the hundredth floor, so I cast Gravity Bomb from a distance. That can’t be...”

“It is! That was me! I had to try so hard to avoid your spell that I leapt into the void. I nearly couldn’t make it back!”

P-poor Satan...

Satan cleared his throat, then said, “A-anyway... Thank you very much for

defeating Lucifer and returning the Black Staff. With things as they were, the monsters of Cocytus could have overrun the surface.”

“Who was that Lucifer guy anyway?” I asked.

“He was a demon created when Locklore itself was created, so that he could make adjustments to the world. He filled the post I currently hold. However, he abused the authority he was given and tried to destroy Locklore. His crimes were so great that they sealed him away in another dimension. What were the higher beings thinking...pulling back someone like that...? Could it mean they’ve truly abandoned Locklore?” Satan sounded dejected, and he didn’t seem to care about how it looked.

“We can leave you to handle Cocytus, right, Satan-san?” I asked, and Satan gave a big nod.

“Yes, yes, thank you again for returning the Black Staff of the Apocalypse. With this, I can strengthen the barrier again and control the dungeon so no more monsters spill outside. Unfortunately, I can’t do anything about the monsters that have already escaped...”

“I think the group we have standing by outside can manage something there.”

They had Philia, Noble, Pomera, and Veranta. And Lunaère and I could go immediately to bolster their forces. We should be able to clean things up pretty quickly now that the stream of monsters was cut off.

“But...Lucifer destroyed the floor on the hundredth floor, so we’ll have to go the slow way up the stairs again,” I said. “And we would have been able to teleport out from the altar in there...”

Even if we took the shortest route, it would take the same three days to get out that it took to get down here.

We didn’t even know what the higher beings were going to throw at us next, so I’d really wanted to avoid having to spend another three days crawling out of Cocytus.

“Oh, that won’t be an issue,” said Satan as he thrust the butt of the staff into the floor. A magic circle appeared, and we heard a loud rumble from downstairs.

“What was that just now...?” I asked.

“The Black Staff of the Apocalypse is for managing Cocytus. I’ve put the hundredth floor back the way it was. You’ll be able to teleport out of Cocytus if you go to the altar in the back,” said Satan proudly.

“Huh, that thing really is useful,” I said, and Satan looked uneasy as he quickly hid the staff behind his back.

...Seriously. It’s not like I want to steal it or anything.

Satan walked with us as we traveled down the path on the hundredth floor.

“This was probably the end of the fight against the higher beings, Kanata. I doubt they have any people that are secret weapons more powerful than the demon created at the beginning of time. And the rest of the Unseen Hand are likely done recovering the other pawns. This should mean the higher beings have no more moves left they can make. The only thing left is to see how they react...”

I shook my head. “...They’re probably still holding on to one person.”

There was that last thing Reniement said: *“Curse Locklore! I only pray the other two will bring destruction upon the world!”*

He very clearly said “the other two.” Naiarotop had one last card to play, something along the lines of Reniement and Lucifer. The first two were terrifying, broken individuals, so I really doubted the last person was someone normal.

Reniement and Lucifer had been sealed away for eternity in another dimension for their great crimes. The third person was definitely going to be a criminal of the same caliber.

And that battle should be my last against Naiarotop. But...even if I won, I

didn't actually have any clue if that would free Locklore from the higher beings' evil influence.

I took a slow, deep breath, then opened my eyes.

"Lunaère-san... We're going to get away from Naiarotop. I...haven't forgotten that promise, that you'll let me come with you to travel the world! Once we beat him, I'm going to make sure you keep that promise, whether you want to or not!"

"K-Kanata?! I-I mean, it did sort of sound like a condition, but it was really just a turn of phrase...u-uh... I-it's just, if I'm with you, then the unholy impurity will make it so you can't live a normal life! So, I just..." Lunaère's face turned bright red as she got worked up into a fluster.

"I don't care about that as much as I want to be with you!" I firmly took her hand in mine and stood in front of her.

I knew I had to say it now, when I could. I had to say it *because* it was now. I didn't know what was going to happen after this. I might never get a chance in the future.

It didn't matter how hard we fought, the higher beings had the overwhelming advantage in this fight. No matter what we did, no matter how much we struggled, it might all be for nothing. We might be doing nothing more than accelerating the end of Locklore.

This world might not exist tomorrow—and that's why I had to say what I wanted to say as soon as possible. Right now.

"U-um, uh, uh, b-but...I...I-I do want to be with you too, but..." Lunaère was trying to select her words carefully. I just waited, standing there in front of her, watching as her lips formed the next words.

"I—!"

"I'm not intruding, am I?" came a voice from behind. It was Satan, who had come to see us off. Lunaère jumped, and her back went ramrod straight.

“K-Kanata, anyway, we should really hurry to the others to report! We don’t know what’s happening outside, after all!” she said, then pulled her hand from mine and practically ran away in a panic down the path. I watched her from behind as she stepped up onto the altar, and then I sighed.

“...Satan-san, you couldn’t have kept your mouth shut for *one more* minute?” I asked.

“M-my apologies, Master Kanata. I just...couldn’t bear the mushiness any longer.” Satan scratched his head, looking apologetic.

-6-

LUNAÈRE AND I used the teleportation circle on the hundredth floor of Cocytus to get out of the dungeon, only to find the area enclosed with an even thicker wall than before.

It looked like they’d already defeated all the monsters.

The crowds of adventurers were shouting in joy and complimenting each other for their achievements. Their numbers had increased severalfold in the three days since Lunaère and I went into the dungeon. I heard that they’d gotten help from the Sophia Trading Company to gather volunteers, but they did a good job getting that many people here in only a few days.

“It seems you were able to defeat the demon,” said Veranta as he walked over to us.

“I’m just happy it looks like you managed to eliminate all the monsters on the surface,” I replied.

“It was quite an ordeal at one point. In the end, we had to call back most of the forces we placed to protect the various important locations in the world. I hope the higher beings don’t take advantage of this... Though, for the moment, let’s just enjoy the fact that we successfully resolved the major issue currently facing us. Cocytus was previously sealed in an ancient temple, but I will build

something stronger in its place.”

It was reassuring to have Veranta, since his skill gave him the ability to deal with any situation, and he simply had good leadership skills. He was a huge help to have as an ally. Without him, there would have been ten—maybe *twenty*—times more people killed because of Lucifer.

“The majority of the people here are A-Rank adventurers right? So, around level 70?” I asked. “There’s not that many people at a higher level than that, and monsters over level 1,000 aren’t rare in Cocytus. You did a good job holding the line.”

“Because I placed my equipment around the battlefield. Besides, there are a good handful of people above level 200 in the world. They rarely step into the limelight, even if a country is at threat of destruction, but the Sophia Trading Company has the power to mobilize them,” explained Veranta with a hint of pride.

Thinking about it, Cardinal Wardell’s God Slayer Knights were in the 300s, and he didn’t seem to have any intentions of using them other than for fighting the higher beings. It did make sense that fighters usually kept secret would be hidden around the world.

A sudden loud cheer, greater than the others so far, echoed from a little way off.

“Look! It’s Lady Pomera, the Dragon God!”

“We won against these monsters because of the Dragon God Pomera!”

“Thank you, Dragon God Pomera!”

“You’ve saved the world!”

Oh hey, that’s a new title...

“E-excuse me, please stand back... Stand back! I-I heard Kanata’s back—I have to go see him!” cried Pomera. I could see her being pressed in by the crowds as she tried to hurry.

“Dragon God Pomera...?” I said, and Veranta nodded.

“Zolophilia borrowed the form of the First Dragon and contributed massively to the fight alongside Pomera. It seems various misconceptions and rumors are spreading.”

“Ah...yeah. This kind of thing’s happened a few times before. I think I get what happened.”

So far, Pomera had collected titles like Saint, Holy Fist, and even Holy Boozer. Now she’d finally made it up to God.

“I heard you’re back, which means you cleaned up that demon, yeah?” came Rosemonde’s voice from behind as I was talking to Veranta.

“You came to help too, Rosemonde-san?”

“I told you, didn’t I? I’ve been in this mess this far, I’m going to see it out to the end. And I am an A-Rank adventurer, kid.”

Just then, Ramiel swooped down to stand beside Rosemonde.

“Lookie here, you’re still alive,” she said. “These higher beings don’t seem to be all that, since they’re messing up dealing with you this much, hee hee hee.” She laughed, then narrowed her eyes and looked at Pomera in the distance and let out a heavy sigh. “But, you know...I’ve got a bone to pick about that half-elf girl being celebrated as a dragon god.”

Apparently even Ramiel came to the fight, but I didn’t think she would have bothered to come over just because she saw me. “Did you...come over because Rosemonde-san is here...?”

“Huh?” Ramiel glared grumpily at me.

“N-never mind, it’s nothing...”

...How attached is this dragonkin to Rosemonde?

“There’s Kanata, and Rosemonde,” came another voice, this time from a girl walking our way. She wore a light robe and had simple gauntlets covering her

hands. Her evenly cut bangs and chilly gaze were features you couldn't miss.

"Kotone-san..." I said.

Kotone Takanashi—the Aries's Hand—and a traveler from another world just like me. The last time I saw her was in Manaloch, the city of magic.

"Oh right, so they called the other travelers here too..." I said.

Travelers were normally given a gift skill by the higher beings, and I'd heard those abilities were often balance breakers. Kotone wasn't really that high a level, but her Aries's Hand skill let her perfectly use any weapon. She would be a huge force to reckon with against the monsters of Cocytus if Veranta gave her a weapon.

"That masked man told me you're in a lot of trouble. I had no idea you were wrapped up in such a big mess," she said.

"Yeah... My selfishness ended up causing those monsters to spill out of the dungeon."

"You're wrong. As long as those poor excuses for gods are doing whatever they want, this kind of thing was going to happen someday. You shouldn't blame yourself too much."

"Thanks..."

It sounded like Veranta had told the other travelers about the situation. All the travelers would have had contact with the higher beings in the first place, and, on top of that, they all had skills with powerful potential.

He must have decided it would be better to be open with them and get their help rather than make some poor attempt to hide the truth.

"Though, if you told everyone here about the higher beings, the world would fall into chaos, probably..." I said, explaining it to myself.

"Actually...I intend to go public with the information," Veranta said in response to me talking to myself.

“Huh...?” I didn’t think I heard him correctly.

“I said, I intend to go public with the information. I will tell everyone that the world of Locklore and everyone in it are nothing more than crude entertainment for the higher beings.”

That was a seriously explosive statement. It left me lost for words.

If he did that, Locklore would lose all its value as entertainment for the higher beings. It wouldn’t matter what absurd disaster there was, everyone would know it was all the higher beings’ doing.

“First, we start with the adventurers here. We gather up anyone who seems like they could be useful and train them up, until we have a high-level fighting force. We will make it so the higher beings will be unable to interfere with this world, no matter how hard they try.”

“I-isn’t that...a bit dangerous? We don’t know what they’ll do if we make them that powerful...”

“Why aren’t you willing to go all in for this? I had already considered this would be the only possibility from the moment I joined you. The die has already been cast. Our only option is to completely eliminate the higher beings’ influence on this world. We have removed the majority of the pawns in the world, and those remaining are in our control. Even so, the higher beings will send a force at us, and we must create an unstoppable force that can immediately repel anything they send at us.”

“What?!”

“Kanata, you can’t possibly be under the misconception that this fight is yours alone? We will free Locklore from the higher beings. This is a revolt, a war between the entirety of Locklore’s humanity against the higher beings.”

This is turning into something huge... Actually, this is what it always was, from the very beginning.

I continued to exist against the higher beings’ will, and that kept reducing the

value of Locklore in their eyes. There was never any other option in the end but to fight, with the entire world on the line.

“There is something I wish to see...” said Veranta. “A Locklore that’s not controlled by the higher beings’ malice, not simply a playground for them. I want to see the *real* Locklore. You two, Kanata and Lunaère, are the ones who showed me that dream. Don’t tell me that after all this, you aren’t prepared to do what needs to be done.”

“Of course we’re prepared. We’ve come this far. I can’t even imagine what the higher beings are going to throw at us next, but we recovered the world’s pawns and we beat back Reniement and Lucifer. We’re going all the way,” I said, and Veranta smiled beneath his mask.

-7-

IN A PURE WHITE SPACE...several tears in the dimension floated in air, showing glimpses of what had become of Locklore.

In the center was Naiarotop, sitting cross-legged in midair, floating as he checked each window, one after another.

His expression was blank, his left hand raised in the air. A huge number of windows showing Divinitter appeared around him.

“This is a serious fight against the machine!”

“Lucifers a total wimp alls he got is some levels lololol”

“I wanted Lunaere to beat his ass by herself”

“I’m actually really starting to enjoy this.”

“They bigged up these three they were sending in and two were smashed in an instant. Bet Naiachans piiissed”

The gods’ messages flowed one after another. They said whatever they liked, as always, and it made Naiarotop sigh.

The gods were already buzzing about the fact that Naiarotop mobilized the Eternal Convicts in order to eliminate the abnormalities in Locklore.

It was just that this was the first time in the otherworld, even for the gods, to see such a blatant fight between the world and the managing faction. That left the gods talking, and of course, left Naiarotop the target of their jeers since he'd been made the fall guy.

"With things this bad, they'll have to shut down Locklore, won't they?"

"Huh? They're ending it? Noooooo!"

"I mean, even if they get rid of Kanata, it's no good. They're just making things worse for no reason. They're just trying to go viral."

There were a lot of people on Divinitter saying Locklore's management had already given up trying to control the world.

And they were right.

Before bringing in the Eternal Convicts, they had no reason to go off the rails in their attempts to eliminate Kanata, since everything was over if they took the entire world of Locklore out with him. And anyway, there was going to be no getting this entertainment back on track for a long-term run after they messed things up this much. It would be safer for them to shut down Locklore right now, rather than get desperate and face even more shame.

But Naiarotop's master couldn't do that for only one reason, and that was because *you know who*, the highest of the Higher Gods didn't like seeing a show close with a half-assed ending. Without his interference, they would have already erased Locklore.

They would instead finish off this Kanata issue and end Locklore with a bang. That was the reason they called on the Eternal Convicts.

"My subject," came his master's voice from no one direction in particular.

"Yes, Master."

"It appears that two out of the three Eternal Convicts, Reniement and Lucifer,

have been defeated. The Unseen Hand of the Gods has also turned fully against us. They have recovered all the pawns in Locklore and backed us into a corner. The gods on Divinitter are certain of Kanata's victory," said the Higher God before continuing. "Well done, my subject. Everything is going exactly as we planned."

That last statement made Naiarotop break into a grin evil to its very core.

"Yes, Master. Nothing unexpected has happened so far."

"A story that unfolds without event is a tedious one indeed. Raise them up, then let them fall. That is the most basic of basics in entertainment. If you had sent the other one in first and ended it, it would have lacked the buildup...and we must deliver a satisfying last episode for *you know who*. I think that is enough for the opening acts, however."

Naiarotop had suspected Kanata and the others would defeat the first two convicts, considering their power, or lack thereof.

"Soon, I will send in the third Eternal Convict. The vilest and most powerful man in Locklore—Zoras, the Cataclysm. That will be the end of Locklore...and it'll also mean I won't have to jump back and forth every time those lowly, other-dimensional people do something," said Naiarotop.

"This should satisfy *you know who*. Shall we bring an end to everything?"

"Yes, Master, as you command," replied Naiarotop courteously to the Higher God.

He then turned to look into one of the warps in the dimension. There, Kanata and all the others were celebrating that they turned back Lucifer's attack. When he saw that, his expression cracked and he let out a laugh.

"At least you can get drunk on your false victory. Just you wait... Kanata! Your end is near. I will give Locklore the most tragic ending ever, then pull the curtain closed!"

Bonus Story:

The Second Coming of Lovis, the Black Reaper

-1-

IT HAPPENED TEN YEARS AGO in the lawless city of Delmond, a paradise for criminals and an extensive slum abandoned by the kingdom.

It was a damned place, filled with people with shady pasts, people who were so poor they had no other place to go, or people who looked to make a profit by preying on others. Murder was the norm—let alone burglary—and it was rare that one of the citizens of this city would stop just for a dead body.

The center of Delmond in particular was plagued by a bloody turf war between three well-armed criminal organizations. Your average resident didn't dare go near.

One of those organizations was Chimera's Venom. While they had the smallest fighting force of the three groups, they consistently maneuvered themselves to be on top, so that there were more cons than pros in attacking them. This allowed them to solidify their status.

Chimera's Venom had their base in a tower; their leader, a large man named Bargo, was on the top floor and facing off against a black-haired boy. Blood and corpses littered the floor around them, a tragedy reaped by the lone boy who broke into their tower.

The boy slowly lowered the scythe held tight in his hand and calmly stepped closer to Bargo.

"That strong, at your age... *And* a scythe... I-I know who you are now! You... you're the murderer who got the capital up in a ruckus! Lovis the Reaper! Why's someone like you targeting Chimera's Venom?!" shouted Bargo.

Lovis let out a snort of laughter.

This lawless city of Delmond was where people gathered when they had no other choices. The foot soldiers and leaders of the criminal organizations here were at most on par with a B-Rank adventurer.

Lovis was sixteen years old and already powerful enough to be equal to an A-Rank adventurer, who were usually so rare you usually only needed one hand to count how many were in a large city. This simply shouldn't have been the kind of place he would bother to attack.

"You know...this lawless city is my hometown," said Lovis. "I heard there were some people using paltry tricks, gathering forces to upset the power dynamic, and terrorizing the people desperately struggling to live another day in this filthy city. I came to see it for myself."

"Th-the Reaper is from here...? It's normal for people to terrorize the weak! We're just trying to survive in this place! Is this your damn idea of justice?!"

Lovis shrugged in response. "Now, now, don't jump to conclusions. I just heard there was someone gathering power in my hometown and got curious. I thought there might be someone who trained themselves up a little bit. And that turned out to be you."

"What?! Y-you saying you wiped us out for *fun*?!"

"It's normal for people to terrorize the weak...wasn't that your logic?" Lovis smiled and raised his scythe.

Bargo felt something cold run down his back. It was clear to him that Lovis wasn't done with his vicious work yet. Lovis planned to kill Bargo as well.

"You've taken your little prank too far, dear." Just then, a voice came from the darkness. At some point when Bargo didn't notice, a long-eared woman had come to sit cross-legged in the opulent chair meant for Bargo.

"...An elf? No, a *high* elf. A mercenary Bargo hired? You must be fairly skilled to move without me noticing," said Lovis.

"It wouldn't be good for me if Bargo died here," said the high elf, her tone

bored. “You know, it’s really quite frustrating to have the pieces I so carefully set up get knocked down by someone. And not even a traveler...just your normal everyday member of the faceless mob. My dear, you’re nothing but a side act.”

“A pretentious woman. I like that. I’ll kill you before I finish off Bargo.”

“Summoning Magic Level 12: Goldburn.” The high-elven woman formed a magic circle.

In response to her call, a golden dragon appeared. Its entire body was covered in glittering gold scales, and its eyes were large gemstones. It almost looked like a statue of pure gold, but it was moving, glaring at Lovis in a way that made aware of the life in it.

“This can’t be the powerful spirit who holds domain over human greed, can it?!” said Lovis. While he’d been cocky a moment before, his expression tensed now. He quickly readied his scythe and lowered himself into a fighting stance. If he made a poor attempt at an attack, he would be killed on the spot. He chose to strengthen his defenses first.

Goldburn was the great spirit who ruled over greed. This was the kind of monster that only appeared in fairy tales. Unlike Bargo’s soldiers, Lovis decided this wasn’t something he could win against easily.

“Who said there was only one?” said the woman, and another magic circle appeared, then another. There were two, three, four, even more Goldburns.

“Th-that’s insane, this can’t be...” said Lovis.

This high-elven woman who appeared out of nowhere was unlike anyone Lovis had ever encountered.

The fight was over in a moment. Actually, it wasn’t even a fight. Lovis was toyed with. It only took a few minutes for him to become covered in blood and collapse to the ground. Even the scythe he held had been shattered by the Goldburns’ claws.

“Huff, huff, huff... No way...this is impossible! My black dragon metal scythe, broken this easily!” he cried.

“Of course it was. It’s not like you ever had chance against the one who manipulates Locklore,” said the woman as she picked up a shard of the metal and easily crushed it between her fingers. Lovis could do nothing but stare in amazement.

“Impossible...that’s impossible...”

“An easy trick for anyone over level 500,” she said, and that’s when Lovis understood. Some people in this world existed on an entirely different plane.

That high elf, Sophia, the World’s Recordkeeper, decided on a whim to let Lovis live, but the terror he felt that day never truly healed.

-2-

IT WAS BECAUSE OF LUCIFER, who was sent by the higher beings, that the entrance opened to the massive dungeon Cocytus, a place that sealed away horrifying monsters. Veranta feared that monsters boasting levels beyond the normal scale would crawl out of the depths one after another, so he was left with no other choice but to summon the powerful from around the world.

Lovis answered the call.

“The others say this is some sort of hell...but I never imagined hell could be so sweet,” he said as he plunged his scythe into the back of a gigantic ogre. “They give us healing potions and equipment and support the fight with golems. And there’s a never-ending horde of monsters! This is paradise! I can feel it... Every time I defeat one of them, the power gathers inside my body!”

Lovis stood atop the monster’s corpse and shrieked with laughter.

“Lovis... He’s perkier than usual,” said Damia, one of Lovis’s underlings.

“...I just hope he doesn’t let us down again,” said Yozakura with a doubtful

expression on her face as she looked up at Lovis.

“I-I know you can’t help it...but I think you’re too hard on him, Yozakura.”

“It’s only because he sullies his own honor and way of living.”

“A-ah...I guess I get that...but...” said Damia as he looked up again at Lovis.

Lovis cast teleportation spells to fly around the monsters and allied golems, toying with his enemies. His large scythe flashed as it sliced down into the head of a huge monster.

“Aaah...the power...it’s flowing into me! Aha ha ha ha ha! This is it! This is the world those people saw! More! Give me more!” Lovis howled with mad laughter and rushed across the battlefield.

“I’m scared Lovis is changing into something else in this mess,” said Damia. “The Lovis I admire...is human. But that person there looks like he’s heading toward something more terrifying than that...”

“I think that’s his ideal. I felt it—recently. I realized that Lovis couldn’t live with pride in this world as a simple human. He needed something to act as the trigger to push him over that line. If this moment is that time, then I couldn’t be happier.”

Damia’s breath caught in his throat as he looked at Yozakura’s expression. Just like Lovis, there was a mad light in her eyes.

A huge centipede monster rushed toward Lovis. He used a teleportation spell to leap onto it, then unleashed a series of slashes with his scythe as he ran along its top.

“Eeeeeeeh!” The huge centipede shrieked and curled its body up as it tried to catch Lovis in its massive, fanged jaws. Lovis went straight toward its head and embedded his blade into it. The centipede stopped, its life spent.

Lovis increased his level by a great amount during the chaos at Cocytus caused by Lucifer.

As he stood atop the giant centipede’s back, he pulled a small fragment of

black metal out. It was a shard of the weapon he once used, a piece of black dragon metal. There were beings in this world, monsters of a different caliber that no human could ever hope to rival in power. Lovis kept that piece of metal as a reminder of that.

He squeezed the shard between his fingers. It let out a snapping sound and crumbled to dust for the wind to take. Lovis watched it go, the corners of his mouth curling up.

He realized that he had finally stepped outside the realms of human capability. With how high his level was, his blade could cut the necks of even those inhuman monsters he'd encountered along the way.

"Just wait... Sophia...Lunaère...Kanata...and you absurd gods who rule this world! I will destroy everything that ever made a fool of me!"

-3-

KANATA AND LUNAÈRE successfully defeated Lucifer, and the fighting force that Veranta put together successfully routed the monsters around Cocytus. Things were calming down after the first stages of treating the severely injured and hunting down any stray monsters, and now they were holding a feast as thanks for the warriors' hard work. There were adventurers scattered about with drinks in hand and cheers ringing out.

"They're quite loud. Shall we get our compensation from that masked man and make our exit?" said Yozakura with an exasperated sigh as she looked at the rambunctious adventurers.

"No, not yet. I've heard a rumor that a certain traveler is here...Kanata..." said Lovis.

"Sir, you don't mean—!" Yozakura gasped.

"Now I fear nothing. The time has come for me to clear away the shame of my past. I plan to challenge him to battle again, and this time, it will be a fight to

the death.” Lovis smiled faintly.

“I was keeping an eye on you bunch of psychos, and it looks like you really are planning something bad,” said someone approaching Lovis and the others.

Lovis turned in that direction to see a man with spiky black and blond hair. There was an unpleasant look to his eyes, a canine poking over his lip, and a massive sword slung over his back.

“Mitsuru, the traveler,” said Lovis.

“Haven’t seen you since Grede’s mansion, pervert,” said Mitsuru. “Nice that I get a chance to give back what you gave me last time.” He pulled the sword from his back and pointed it at Lovis.

In Ploroque, the city of merchants, Mitsuru attacked Lovis after mistaking him for someone working for Grede. A battle ensued. Lovis technically won in the end, but Kanata appeared, leaving the fight unresolved.

“I knew there was something wrong with you,” said Mitsuru. “I’m gonna beat you to a pulp, without a care in the world. You’re not the only one who got stronger from beating those monsters!”

Mitsuru leapt toward Lovis.

Veranta provided them with items and an army of golems, allowing them to defeat a horde of monsters more powerful than them. Mitsuru, with his gift skill that allowed him to easily damage higher-level opponents, was the person who benefited the most from that situation.

With Double, his ability that allowed him to double a specific stat of his, he could earn experience by hiding behind the golems and delivering decisive blows against the monsters, making it easy for him to gain levels.

A yellow light enveloped Mitsuru’s body. “Double...Speed Mode!”

His speed instantly increased. His swift blade rushed toward Lovis and Yozakura, who stood beside him.

And the next moment, Lovis, Yozakura, and Damia disappeared.

“Huh...?”

A scythe blade lay across Mitsuru’s throat.

“Is that the best you can do with your special skill? You’re not even worth playing with now,” whispered Lovis into Mitsuru’s ear.

“N-no way, that’s crazy...” Mitsuru couldn’t accept the difference in power.

He should have been the one with an overwhelming advantage when it came to leveling up at this battle at Cocytus, but Lovis managed to increase his level more than two times as much as Mitsuru simply through his battle acumen and thirst for violence. The greatest difference between Mitsuru and Lovis, though, was in that Mitsuru did nothing more than rely on Double for safe monster hunting. Mitsuru might have talent, but he wasn’t a fiend like Lovis.

“While I might have enjoyed killing you after our fight at Grede’s mansion, killing you like this would be a bit of a letdown. I have high hopes for you, Mitsuru Ijuuin. One day, I hope you’ll entertain me again. I’ll wait until then.”

Lovis slammed the butt of his scythe into Mitsuru’s abdomen, causing him to clutch at his stomach and crumple to the ground.

“A-agh!”

“Ha ha ha... I have finally reached it,” said Lovis. “I have reached the height where the rulers of the world perch. I don’t care if they’re the manipulators of the world or even gods, I will kill them all and take their place! I look forward to you coming to stop me, Mitsuru.”

Lovis turned away, and Mitsuru shouted, “Wait, you bastard!”

“You can’t do anything, not as you are now. Abandon your logic and your fear. Entrust everything to a primitive instinct! If you do, someday, surely, you can become like me.”

With his back to Mitsuru, Lovis walked away. Yozakura and Damia rushed after him.

“Sir!” called Yozakura happily, but the scythe’s blade flashed before her eyes. It slashed into the earth as if refusing her and Damia. “S-Sir...?”

“I have no need anymore... No need for opening acts, no need for organizations, and no need for companions. The two of you will never become stronger than you are now. I can obtain everything I desire with my own power now. I will no longer maintain relationships that hold me back,” said Lovis coldly as Yozakura and Damia stood in disbelief.

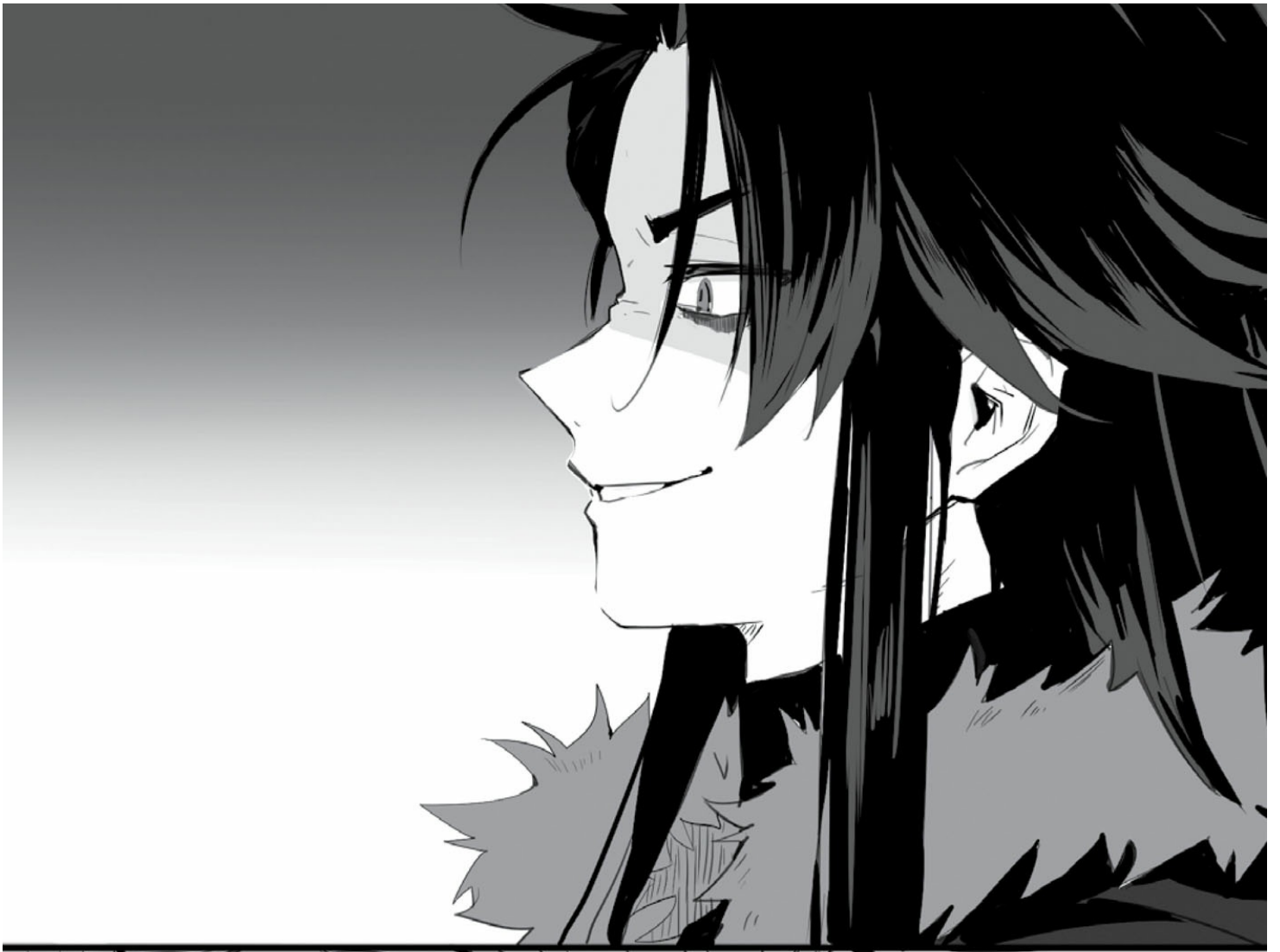
“B-but! I don’t need anything more than to be beside you and see where you go!” cried Yozakura desperately as she lost her composure and tears streamed from her eyes.

Damia looked sad, but it seemed like he knew this was going to happen someday. All he did was bow his head and say, “Thank you for everything, Sir. No matter where you go or what you do...I pray you find satisfaction wherever you end up.” Lovis didn’t even turn back at Damia’s last heartfelt words.

“Hi, Mister...what are you doing? Are you fighting?” came the voice of a small girl who appeared in front of Lovis. She had very unique hair—wound up into uneven spirals, a divide on the left and right between pale pink and lime green curls.

Lovis smiled slightly at the girl and crouched down so their eyes were level. “Little miss, do you know a man with black hair and a gold sword?”

“Kanata...? Philia knows Kanata! He’s Phila’s friend! He’s over there! Philia will take you!”



“That makes our conversation quick, then. But it’s okay, you don’t have to show me—just tell me where he is.”

“Hey, Mister, what do you want Kanata for?”

“Hm...? Oh, nothing really.” Lovis’s eyes narrowed, and his mouth curled up. “I just thought I might go kill him.”

And then a huge white fist erupted from the ground and nearly punched him to death.

-4-

LOVIS SAT ON A BED in the makeshift first-aid facility near Cocytus with a dreary expression on his face.

Three days had already passed since the mysterious girl named Philia punched him, but he hadn’t slept a single night since. Every day he spent without sleeping and without eating. The facility had a cohort of white magic users, and they’d treated him several times, but his body wasn’t recovering.

There was no doubt emotional damage, because of course there would be. He had been so overjoyed to attain the power to allow him to fight against the rulers of this world, and then a random little girl sent him flying and he couldn’t do a single thing about it. It was incredibly difficult to handle the shock that gave him.

The absurdity of Locklore ran so much deeper than Lovis originally realized. The growth he achieved was like if a tiny frog living in a small puddle moved into a well instead. This new world was incomparably vast and deep, and there was still the ocean out there. Lovis didn’t even have the right to dip his toes in the ocean.

“Sir, pull yourself together! Y-you just happened to run into a bad opponent!

It was just happenstance!” said Damia, desperately trying to reason with Lovis, but he wouldn’t listen at all. He just stared up at the ceiling with a vacant look on his face. “Th-the world looks like it’s going to be a mess soon! I’m sure you’ll get plenty of chances to raise your level! You just have to get over—!”

“I’m just...tired. I don’t want to fight anymore...” said Lovis, his expression devoid of emotion.

“What are you saying?! I don’t want to see you like this, I don’t!” Damia slumped to the ground, his head in his hands.

“Sir... I brought you some fruit. I’ve cut it up nice and small, I’m sure you can manage to eat this. Here, let me feed you,” said Yozakura. In complete contrast to Damia, she was beaming with an affectionate smile. She softly placed her hand on Lovis’s back, though he didn’t respond, and gently brought a piece of fruit to his mouth with her other hand.

“Yozakura...doesn’t seeing him like this make you sad?” asked Damia.

“...I realized something. I might have complained the whole time, but I really enjoyed our time traveling the kingdom, just the three of us.” Her smile was full of warmth, but then she turned a cool gaze on Lovis. “Which is why I am much happier caring for him like this than I would be if he abandoned us and went traveling alone.”

“I don’t like it! Sir! Please go back to normal, Sir!” Damia grabbed Lovis by the shoulders and shook him vigorously.

Afterword

THIS IS NEKOKO, the author of this book. Thank you so much for purchasing the sixth volume of *Disciple of the Lich*!

Lunaère-san is front and center on the cover again, for the first time in a long time! The last time Lunaère-san was a major character on the cover was Volume 1. She did make an appearance on the cover of Volume 2, but definitely not as the main. (For those of you who didn't notice, she's peeking around the corner on the left side of the Volume 2 cover! If you didn't catch her, go check it out!)

I've only been able to write about Lunaère-san from someone else's perspective or in side stories, so I haven't had a chance to really write about her. In complete honesty...if I work her into the main story, it just jumps ahead. And this time, the story actually did make incredibly fast progress. It was fun to put her in the main story alongside Kanata and really work her in.

I did consider making Lunaère the main focus of the extra story for this volume as well, since I had the chance, but in the end, I decided to grant that position to Lovis-sama.

This might be the last time he makes an appearance, after all... I'm glad I could make him a cool hero for his last appearance. Although I'm not sure about the "cool" part...

Here in Volume 6, Kanata finally reunited with his beloved teacher, and Naiarotop, Locklore's archnemesis, began acting in earnest, which means that the story is suddenly moving toward a close.

I think it's quite likely that Volume 7 of *Disciple of the Lich* will be the last.

Locklore's fate hangs in the balance in the fight between Kanata and Naiarotop, but how will it end? I've been writing *Disciple of the Lich* for over three years, and I can't help feeling incredibly emotional that the conclusion is coming...

Well, all righty then, I hope you look forward to the final volume of *Disciple of the Lich*! I'd love to see you all watch over Kanata and Lunaère's story until the very end!



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